You, me and our communities

Finding the fabric of Britain

KARMARAMA

Part of **Accenture** Interactive

Why Karmarama?

It's hard to imagine now, but just under a year ago we were looking ahead to a brave new decade. Fatigued by Brexit, the inescapable narrative in 2019 had been one of division. The media relentlessly portrayed a bleak picture of Broken Britain, a nation riven culturally, economically, politically and socially. At Karmarama, we didn't buy into the sweeping divides they saw everywhere (and were helping to entrench).

As a progressive creative company founded on empathy, we've always worked harder and smarter to understand people. Our creativity is forged on a sharp appreciation of individuals, society and culture. We thrive on creating ideas and experiences that resonate with people, connecting through the things that matter most to them.

Not only were we dissatisfied with the media's stereotyping, we also wanted to do what we've always done – spend time with the people our creativity is designed for. Advertising has often been accused of being out of touch with reality, of trading on old emotions or hackneyed views of the world that are no longer attuned to British culture. Certainly, the complexities of modern life can only be truly understood with more sophisticated means of gathering insight than our industry is used to. So, most marketers bypass real world insight for the more readily available, easily digestible quantified data mined from our digitised lives. Nothing like the tight discussion guide or the two-dimensional stimulus of a focus groups to keep confirmation bias alive and well.

Over the past three years, we've been looking at ways of opening our minds and seeing afresh. In our enthusiasm for unconventional discovery, we put together a team with a unique range of skills. A strategist,

a creative director, an anthropologist and a data strategist have been working alongside a journalist and a documentary-maker to take a deeper and more holistic approach to understanding people and communities today. Looking for connections, not divisions.

As part of Accenture Interactive, our findings are powered by unrivalled analytical and technological capability. It means we work against accepted assumptions and reported views, venturing beyond what people simply think they know about other people. Of course, when we first set out to discover why and how people come together, no-one (outside epidemiologist circles) had foreseen the global upheaval to come. What we started to discover about community life in the UK in 2019 is something we can now all appreciate, having lived through lockdown. The sense of belonging that comes from shared experiences and interests can be far more powerful than the divisive narratives that surround us.

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We chose five communities that would best represent the nation we are now. This report documents what we discovered about them over the course of a nine-month period, using face-to-face ethnographical research anthropological analysis and netnography, and with further panel research conducted during 2020. We've seen that strong new communities can form today. People are finding powerful ways to connect with each other. The sense of belonging that we saw whilst conducting our research in 2019 is something we can all now appreciate in shared adversity. Rather than divide us, continued cultural and social change is creating fresh opportunities to discover what can bring us together. One new community at a time.

Introduction

The beginning of a new decade is an appropriate time to weigh up how we're doing as a nation.

"Are we on the right track?"

"Where do we go from here?"

In the UK, this line of inquiry is hugely scarred by the upheaval of the preceding decade.

Referred to by Guardian columnist Andy Beckett as "the age of perpetual crisis",[1] the 2010s began with the aftershocks of a major financial crisis. The middle years were defined by the immense national divide of Brexit (not forgetting the resurgence of the Scottish independence movement), whilst the final years of the decade were mired by the fallout of the referendum, precipitating a constitutional crisis.

No wonder evaluations of UK society throughout that contentious decade regularly contain words like "fractured",[2] "fragmented"[3] and "divided". [4] Where is the community spirit? The comfort of shared values that brought people together? Replaced – if the media is to be believed – by separate tribes riven by every conceivable cultural and ideological divide. Outside of these clans, life is becoming increasingly insular and impersonal.

Are the traditional pillars of society finally crumbling? There's a strong case for this centuries-old complaint. Communities might once form around an industry or profession,[5] but with the near-extinction of UK industry,[6] the 'gig economy'[7] the nomadic, portfolio[8] nature of modern careers, and the increasing prevalence of remote working,[9] the workplace is no longer a social hub.[10]

Proximity was an even more powerful factor in the establishment of communities.[11] But digital technology has created virtual proximity, spawning impersonal social interaction[12] and a new 'loneliness epidemic'.[13] Where a sense of identity once brought people together, the growth of 'identity politics' has focused on the negatives of "otherness" and turned our special differences into something increasingly controversial and divisive.[14]

Multiculturalism,[15] the demise of recognisable social classes,[16] changing attitudes to gender identity,[17] the shrinking influence of religion,[18] and the polarisation and diversification of political ideology[19] have all eroded the concept of collective and individual identities.[20]

Whether relating to Brexit, the Black Lives Matter movement or arguments over gender identities, issues of identity now separate people as much as unite them. As if the waters weren't muddy enough, along comes COVID-19. At the time of writing, the pandemic prohibits large gatherings and is impacting social interactions in ways that are, as yet, impossible to quantify.[21] On the other hand, it seems this worldwide phenomenon is helping people rediscover a lost sense of community. It has sparked "a sustained, engaged concern for the wellbeing of others"?[22] But will it last? As lockdowns ease, old political and demographic fault lines are starting to reappear.[23]

Social and political discord may appear to be in the ascendant.[24] Yet people the length and breadth of the country are undoubtedly continuing to make social connections while forming and strengthening their communities. This report explores – and celebrates – how and why such groups are being set up. We look at the values, cultural trends and social drivers that can unite people, not alienate them.

Methodology

To discover the key to modern communities, Karmarama assembled a highly specialised team from the worlds of advertising, anthropology, film and data analysis.

This team selected five diverse communities from throughout the country and set about finding out all about them. How and why had they come together? How had the communities blossomed and expanded? How did they affect the lives of their members? A journalist and a documentary-maker helped present the findings.

We narrowed a list of fifty communities down to just five, truffling out the ones that were truly unique and broke with tradition. Each group had emerged organically, and independently from any longstanding organisations, and transcended all boundaries of age, class and race.

The team spent time with each of these communities, interviewing them, and witnessing and logging how they function and interact. We asked members why they joined, what role they played within the group and what difference it made to their lives.

The team then analysed and codified this information to define the differences and similarities existing between the groups and people. Gradually, we formed a unique picture of how social units form and flourish in Britain today, and what true community means.

As you might expect with an anthropologist on board, the team considered the interplay between universal human traits and more specific instances of their behaviour. By drawing out common themes between the groups, we began to understand more about communities generally. Putting our subjects under the microscope, a team of data scientists at Karmarama used machine learning to quantify and visualise the themes coming through the research. This combination of longstanding and pioneering techniques gave us completely new interpretations of people and their lives.

Purpose

Any common thread linking these distinctive communities is an insight into how people engage and form social units. We set out to discover how these units inform the individual's values, identity and culture, and what these dynamics say about wider society.

Case
Studies

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Welsh Warriors
Pontypool

When David Bradford, a carpenter from Pontypool, first started arm wrestling in 2015, he found himself having to travel to Swindon to connect with fellow enthusiasts because there was no club in South Wales.[25]

He decided to take matters into his own hands

by establishing the Welsh Arm Wrestling Association ('Welsh Warriors'), which initially drew together a small, dedicated group of local strongmen.

"A couple of us, like-minded people, sort of enjoyed arm wrestling. We started going to competitions and realised we had enough to sort of make a professional arm-wrestling club. The first in Wales, actually."

From there, the Welsh Warriors expanded into the surrounding towns and cities, both recruiting competitors with serious professional ambitions (including David, who is a British Champion), and forming a strong group of friends around the sport. A community was born and continues to expand; David is keen to grow the Welsh Warriors to twenty people during the next year, putting *"Welsh arm wrestling on the map."*

The community hub is an arm wrestling gym built on David's farm in Pontypool where a group with ages ranging from sixteen to sixty-five, from professions including lawyers and tradesmen (and the unemployed) train and socialise.

And as well as having the desired impact on David's training schedule, the presence of a club in their own town inspired others to take up the sport, as David puts it, *"once it's close to home, people tend to come and make the effort, and put the hours in".*

So, who are these people?

"As a whole", he tells us, they're *"fairly big, fairly muscly guys"*, such that people looking at the group from the outside might have *"a perception of us being a bit scary and a bit of a handful and stuff"*, especially *"some of the bigger guys in the group"*. (But, he's quick to say, this perception is quite far from the truth!)

As more and more people join the club, David has focused as much on developing a local scene, capable of holding its own against any other in the world, as he has on his own fitness and skills as a competitor. To an extent, the community has formed around his drive and passion.

The expansion of the Welsh Warriors, as well as the profile of its members, meant practical concerns soon gave way to deeper ambitions:

"I realised we had a lot of potential here in Wales for professional arm wrestlers."

The idea that Wales might be a particularly fertile breeding ground for arm wrestlers informs another defining characteristic and driving force behind the Welsh Warriors: its inherent Welshness.

As David Bradford puts it, *"We've all got a bond of being Welsh, and we're very proud of being Welsh."* He is, in a word, *"patriotic"*.

Affinity with the local area also informs the group's identity:

"I'm very proud to be from Pontypool. I've grown up here and I've come to school here", adds David.

Yet, in the shadow of global shifts that altered the face of the region forever, Pontypool and its residents suffered something of an identity crisis:

"Pontypool's very much a mining town, so, generally, the people are pretty tough. It's a great place to live. I mean, it's got good and bad parts. It can be a little bit dire with shops shutting, and things like that. The recession [of 2008] hit Pontypool quite hard, I think."

But there is cause for optimism:

"I definitely think Pontypool is on the up", he says. *"There's a lot of people moving in. There's a lot of houses being built, and there is money being put in. There's a new hospital being built just down the road. There's funding being put in, and I think people are looking forward to the future, really."*

Although 'Welshness' is a strong part of their collective identity, it is not an element which creates any barriers to entry. Through the sport, the arm wrestlers have also made friends with people across the UK, and as far afield as Turkey and Eastern Europe. Due, in part, to a strengthening of these connections, as well as finding new audiences via social media, the number of devotees is growing, and the club is actively seeking to encourage others to join them from *"far and wide"*, according to David.

This includes outreach to people across the country including those newly arriving from overseas, as well as strengthening ties with neighbours. As an example

of the latter, the group have made friends in Merthyr Tydfil, a town less than an hour away, but which many of them had never seen any reason to visit before taking up arm wrestling.

With arm wrestling the fulcrum around which this social unit formed, demographic differences that can cause division and prejudice in other communities are largely overlooked: if you love arm wrestling, little else matters.

As David puts it: *"All nationalities, races, religions. It doesn't really matter. If you're into arm wrestling, we've got something to speak about."*

"We're very proud of the community really", he tells us. *"We wouldn't speak to each other on a normal day-to-day basis; we wouldn't really bump into each other, probably. [But] we all love arm wrestling, so everything else builds from there. And I've made some great friends from all over place, really."*

And this openness to any nationality or culture serves both to expand and enrich the community:

We've got guys from different countries coming in and enjoying the sport that we all love."

"We've got a Bulgarian", David continues. *"We get Polish coming over"*, he says.

David believes that these positive experiences with people from different backgrounds, driven by a shared love of arm wrestling, have helped shape an ethos within the sport's community which encourages diversity and abhors discrimination:

"Yes, it's great that we can bridge the divides, and bridge the gaps. Because I think in today's society, really, I think it can be a little bit segregated."

Danny, who moved to Wales from Bulgaria, had *"a few problems"* initially, according to Carl:

"People weren't speaking to him because he was foreign," he explains. *"There were a few people around the area and all that, who would have a bit of a go at him. People weren't getting on with him."*

Danny was keen to join the Warriors but waited two years before doing so, fearing rejection. Bucking the painful trend, Carl was determined to accept him straight into the fold: *"When he contacted us, I said, 'Well, get up here.' I give him my address, post code. He come up, and he's a big member of the team. A champion."*

Not only have the Warriors accepted Danny, they celebrate him, and his membership has helped inform the community's identity. *"Danny's a Bulgarian. He's part of us,"* Carl concludes.

Although 'male dominated', the sport is open to any gender. Arm wrestling also transcends political divides; while David believes that politics can segregate people, he believes communities like the Welsh Warriors, and sport in general, can build bridges. The ability to cross these divides has expanded the group's horizons. The Welsh Warriors' love of their sport has connected them to a UK-wide community of fellow devotees with whom they train and compete around the country. *"I've got friends all over the country that I can rely on,"* says David, *"I've even got friends in different parts of the world"*. *"Before I went to Vietnam [on holiday], I contacted their wrestling team online and asked if I could join a training [session]. That was a couple of years ago and we're still good friends. We talk a couple of times a month over the computer."*

Arm wrestling plays the role of strengthening social bonds, but it's also expanded David's personal horizons:

"Being so secluded up here, it's nice to be part of a team where you can travel round, go to different cities and towns, and have a taste of city life. It really is a small but fantastic community that gives us so much. I now have friends in central Ireland, Scotland, London - all over the UK. In most cities in the UK that I might travel to I can find a friend though arm-wrestling and meet up with them. I have also been all over Europe. I didn't have that before, and it is wonderful."

While the sport itself is a stress-reliever, it is also a means of self-improvement. Arm wrestling is extremely technical and getting to grips with its rules is both empowering and challenging:

"Arm wrestling isn't all about strength", David tells us. *"If you're at professional level then generally technique plays a massive part, and then you build on your strength after that. There're so many different moves you've got to take to get down, and different positions. There's a lot involved, actually. It's quite surprising."*

Across the board, there's space to train, improve and compete:

"It's a professional sport", Carl says, during a training session in the gym. *"You wouldn't go down a boxing gym and think you were going to beat [Anthony] Joshua, especially if you've never done it before. Arm wrestling is the same, I think. You train two times a day, six days a week. You put a lot of work into this."*

"A lot of people have never heard of a professional arm wrestler before, they just think it's something someone does after a couple of beers in the pub", David explains. However, those who do learn the graft and craft that goes into it are *"quite impressed"*.

And this commitment comes from a deep-rooted, autonomous drive to build something better: *"We're not getting paid for it. We do it purely for the love. It's growing. We've started an organization called the PAA, which is the Professional Arm wrestling Association. It's got a bit of interest fired up over the last year or so, which is exciting to see."*

Beyond the stress-relief of training and the satisfaction of competition and self-improvement, there's also a hugely important social dynamic.

As David puts it, *"Arm wrestling is a community"*; one that is built on mutual support: *"We look after each other."*

This social unit exists online, with the group always *"in constant contact with each other, via messenger groups, and things like that"*, as well as offline: *"We go out for drinks together, we socialize"*.

For David, both the commitment and focus required to succeed at arm wrestling and the social outlet offered by the sport can tangibly improve the wellbeing of its practitioners, something he sees as especially important given that so many young men are experiencing mental health issues.

"There's a lot of people with depression, anxiety, these days", he says. *"So I think the sport is fantastic for that. I think any sport is fantastic for that. And arm wrestling's definitely, definitely up there."*

Similarly, recovering from a divorce, another member of the society, Chip developed a renewed sense of optimism through the friendships he built when arm wrestling in Wales.

David tells us that it's a common experience: *"We've got guys that have overcome addictions, anxiety, depressions; people who have fairly serious health problems that have been in the sport. And the sport's sort of carried them through that...I think it's great for that reason."*

And Then The
World Changed…

All of the social, physical, competitive and self-improvement elements of arm-wrestling have all been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. But while the physical act was impossible during lockdown, the community appears to be intact and unbowed, perhaps even strengthened by the new focus on its existence.

The community is using this time to educate and train virtually, to keep the activity and the social connections alive.

David explains: *"We're trying to make the best of a bad situation, we put in training programmes, training from home, via Facebook, and, you know, YouTube, and stuff like that, and just trying to get people doing as much as they can, really, from their living rooms."*

"So, we're trying to fit in putting bits and pieces online for people, using bands, using weights, trying to replicate, basically, arm wrestling positions you get into"

For David, the challenge of adapting to life in lockdown was especially pronounced. He relocated to Scotland to be closer to his girlfriend just before the pandemic struck, meaning he was already having to find ways to evolve the community and his involvement in it beyond their setup in 2019. Despite his efforts, his ability to recreate the scenario of the communal gym at the bottom of his garden is compromised – he can only go so far to replicate the experience:

"I have brought some weights with me, so, yes, everything is done in the house. I think, you know, table time for arm wrestling, it's like anything, to get good at something, you have to be doing it. You can only get so far lifting weights, and various things like that, but table time's out the window"

The crisis has, however, given David a new perspective on life, and specifically what his chosen sport brings to it:

I moved up here a month ago. I was expecting to go home every month, and I can't. I don't know when I'm going to be able to go back home, see my dogs, see my mum and dad, and, you know, my old man's just turned 70 as well. So, he's in, like, lockdown. It has put everything into perspective, and I mean, you've just got to get on with it, but at the same time, you don't realise what you've got until it's gone."

Through an increased online presence, the arm wrestling community has used the opportunity to grow, becoming a more visible and accessible sport throughout. The group is developing new ways of interacting and bonding. This increased outreach has also given people outside of the community new avenues to become a part of it.

Social media is helping members of the Welsh Warriors and other arm wrestling communities around the UK stay both active and connected to one another and the wider arm wrestling community.

In doing so it has also become an avenue for members to learn more about each other when they can't meet in person to compete:

"Social media, and messages, and group chats, and things like that. Video calls, and things. But, yes, in terms of training and competitions, I can't see anything going on there until at least the end of the year, to be fair."

"So, Mighty Paul Maiden, who is the UK Special Arm Wrestling Association President, he gets people via Skype and then basically interviews them. He interviewed me a couple of days ago and that was an hour-long interview. So, just me and him chatting all about arm wrestling, about the UK scene, world scene and what's going to happen and how we're coping in this situation."

Their digital presence is also introducing new audiences to the world of arm wrestling – something that probably wouldn't have happened as readily without lockdown and the need to focus on digital activities:

"The people who haven't done it before and have never put their arm on an arm wrestling table professionally, and never trained professionally, hopefully them watching the videos that now us, as arm wrestlers, are putting online and putting content out there, you know, it might call up the sport in that sense."

Wonderful Wild Women

the Lake District

Wonderful Wild Women is a grassroots community that celebrates women and their engagements with the outdoors. It introduces its members to activities such as mountain biking, fell running and Ice swimming, regardless of their ability.

One of its members explains
over a cup of tea in a local café:

"Our general ethos, really, is just about inspiring and encouraging any sort of adventure, big or small, and the positive effect that doing that and making that choice can have generally on your wider life."

Men are by no means excluded from the movement, and there are no strict barriers to membership, but its most committed and vocal supporters are the women of the Lake District.

The community was founded by Sarah Gerrish, an architect who became a new mum while working and studying and soon felt disconnected from the outdoors (although her husband was able to continue his outdoor pursuits).

As Sarah puts it, *"[It started] as a response, really, to how I was feeling. I was trying to find something positive to bring out of that [situation], and something to help me feel better."*

"I started the community 'Wonderful Wild Women' as a way of trying to inspire myself originally, but it evolved to inspire more women to get outdoors."

With Ambassadors now helping Sarah to promote and organise the entire spectrum of activity, the uptake shows no sign of slowing down. This expansion is not what Sarah planned when setting up the group, but she has embraced its organic growth:

"I never intended it to become what it is now, and I was never expecting to be doing what I am now, so it was a big surprise."

"It's quite overwhelming to think about it. You get a bit of imposter syndrome, but I am very proud of it. I love hearing stories from people that have done these incredible, massive feats of endurance, but equally, it's the small moments; someone's first swim and the pride and the smile on their face from doing that. And it's really special to me to be involved with that, and to know that I've helped to enable that."

Sarah explains that the group's ambition to inspire all women to get into the outdoors *"allows for connections with all sorts of different people."*

This embracing of difference has broadened her horizons: *"Prior to this, my social group was probably quite narrow really. Now I've got friends in their early 20s through to their 70s and everything in between. It's opened a lot of doors in that way."*

Nowhere is this openness to diversity more apparent than when the group comes together for a lake swim early on a Saturday morning. The quiet is punctured by spirited laughter as an array of characters -- from all over the country, all ages, body shapes, fitness, ability, incomes levels, professions, careers and political sensibilities -- converge on the water, bonding over their shared experience.

"That kind of interaction between people who don't know each other, doing something that they've never done before, that's quite special," says Sarah.

For her, diversity is not a 'tick-box' exercise, it's the lifeblood of the group: *"Our strength comes from our differences and the differences we can bring into it. I think whether that's differences in our interests or our backgrounds and beliefs, it all feeds in."*

This diversity isn't superficial, but entirely organic, as Vicky, a die-hard member, explains, *"It wouldn't matter what people thought or what opinions they had or who they voted for or, I don't know, if they were vegan, or if they ate meat. It wouldn't matter if they wanted to come and swim because that's our common interest, so it wouldn't matter."*

Sarah initially set up an Instagram account to promote the adventures of 'wild women' across the globe, which now has thirty thousand

followers. The movement gradually transferred 'offline', using local Facebook groups to organise events in the Lake District and across the UK, from wild swims in freezing Tarns to runs across undulating hills.

The online community continues and is a space of openness and honesty, with women sharing details about their lives and hurdles they have overcome.

"We've built a strong foundation", Sarah tells us, *"and the core community is based here in the Lake District, but, really, we're there to celebrate women all over the world and all over the UK. And hopefully make connections and break down barriers and bridge differences everywhere."*

Sarah initially built an online following by encouraging women to get active in the outdoors 'from the side-lines' of her home. And it was through these digital connections that her suggestions of swims, runs and rides morphed into events and meet-ups.

The Instagram presence of the Wonderful Wild Women has similarly enabled them to establish national and global relationships.

"There have been physical connections that have then come from social media," says Sarah. *"We've met up with people from around the UK, and people from around the UK have come to join us on things that we've done here in Cumbria."*

There is a distinctive honesty in the way the Wonderful Wild Women present themselves, with captions stating that a lady summiting a mountain is also a mother of three or images displaying hairy legs underneath leggings.

Sarah believes this honesty enables the group to take people "behind the scenes" of inspirational and seemingly unobtainable images we see online; telling the whole story rather than selecting the best bits, a rejection of the Influencer-driven 'selfie' culture that projects perfection at all costs.

Although the Wonderful Wild Women's use of social media has had a positive impact on the group and its members, their relationship with the medium is more nuanced. For Gilly, the ability just to be herself on the shores of a lake is a welcome antidote to her experiences online, particularly on social media.

"I think authenticity is more important now than ever", she explains, *"especially in a world of Instagram and Facebook and social media, because there are lots of people that talk a good talk but don't necessarily walk a good walk in that way. And so, what is nice about this community is that it is authentic – everyone is doing it to the best of their abilities and not really caring, at all actually, about sponsorship and about followers and about how it's perceived. And they're happy to be there warts and all; failing but giving it a try."*

When Sarah started Wonderful Wild Women, she was feeling disconnected from her new surroundings after recently moving to the Lake District:

"I started organising local walks to actually start exploring my new environment. I thought it was a good way to try and build a bit of a local network and community. Up until that point, I'd really never ventured out into nature too much."

But, in the three to four years since the community began, this love of the outdoors has grown as Sarah has become "connected to the area".

In Sarah's experience, this form of connection to the natural surroundings helps people to appreciate where they live.

As Gilly puts it: *"There's something quite magical about just being in the middle of a lake by yourself, bobbing up and down and just watching the world unfold. It's pretty special."*

For Sarah and her friends, the terrain of the Lakes, shifting weather patterns and temperatures connect them to the natural world in a way which engenders a sense of peace and wellbeing.

Sarah insists that, despite the community's connection with the Lake District, their endeavours, and the benefits they enjoy, can be universal: *"I think there's something out there for everyone, whether it's just taking your shoes off and standing in the grass in the middle of the park, right through to mountaineering, or whatever. I think the outdoors is a spectrum of all sorts of things and I think there's something out there for everybody to enjoy."*
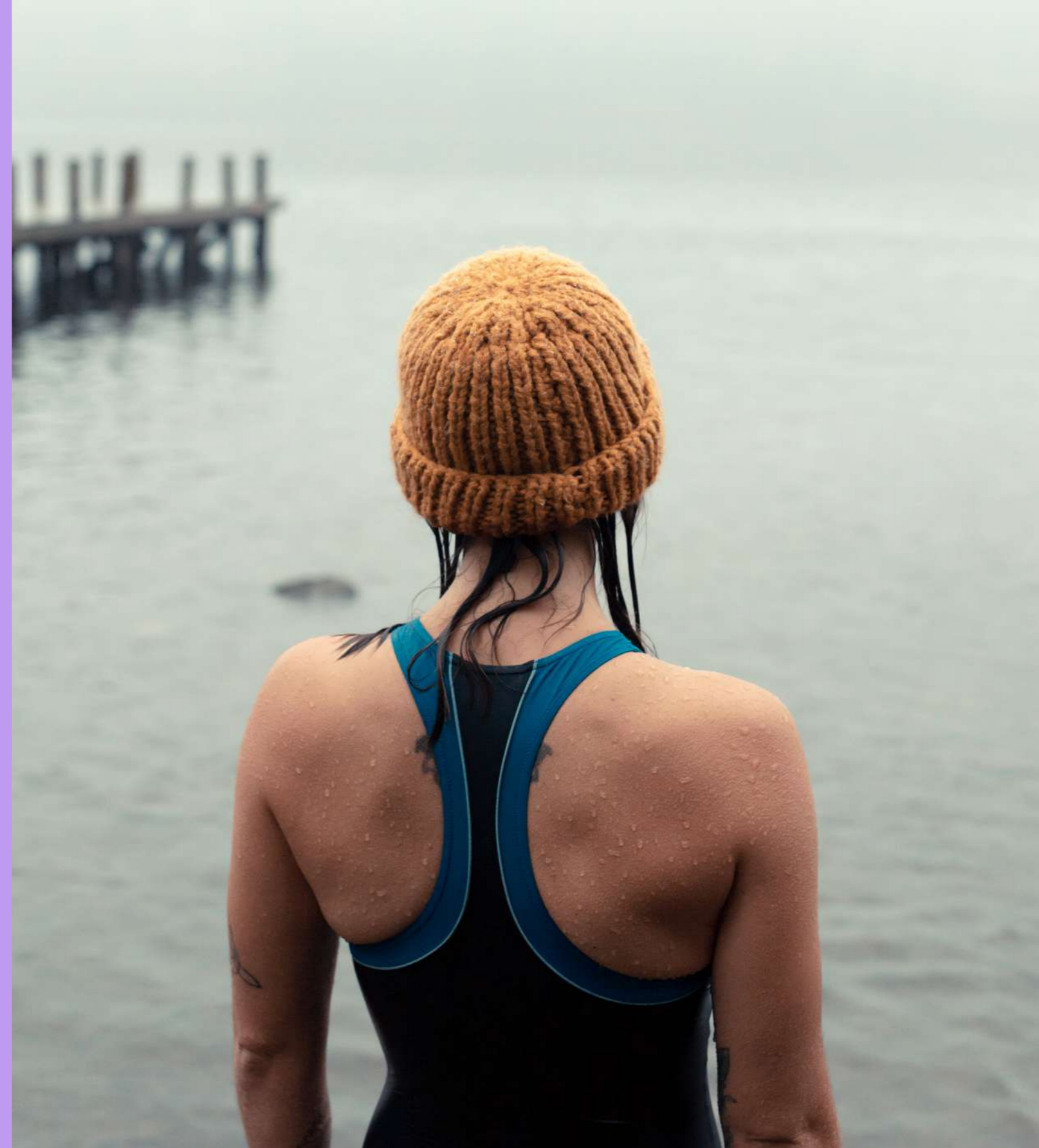
However, there is something special about the surroundings in the Lake District that fuels a sense of openness:

"I think being outdoors creates a level playing field", Sarah says. *"People talk about the things they enjoy about the outdoors, rather than what might divide them."*

In her view, this sense of togetherness counters certain assumptions about the divisive nature of today's British society: *"I think it's quite easy to view the UK as being quite fragmented and disjointed, and there is a lot of internal conflict within communities. But here, I think we're quite lucky. Most people that you come across, they're always happy to engage; especially when you're outside, it provides a bit of a neutral backdrop."*

As well as providing an escape from the stresses of modern life, for the Wild Women, the great outdoors is a sanctuary from the issues that cause division in metropolitan society. It is also a safe space to discuss sensitive issues. Various members of the group speak freely about the idea that potentially difficult topics of conversation can be covered without friction when one is surrounded by nature.

"I think it's really fundamental that it's open to everyone", Sarah explains, *"because as soon as you start putting barriers up to certain types of people or communities, I think you instantly alienate people."*

"I've been through a lot of situations that people might be experiencing themselves." So, Sarah reasons, *"I think it would be the death of the community, really, if you started to switch off to certain people and not be open to everyone."*

For Sarah, this lack of judgement is fundamental to the community: *"Honestly, it's just made me happier because I've met people that I can unapologetically be myself with. I don't feel like I'm being judged. Just engaging with a whole variety and diversity of people that I wouldn't have otherwise."*

In practical terms, Wonderful Wild Women aims to empower women to take part in sports in which they might not otherwise feel encouraged to participate.

Whatever their fitness level or experience of the outdoors, Sarah aims to support members to achieve their goals. *"In the world of the outdoors, it's the elite or the ones that go 'really big' that are celebrated,"* she says.

When describing their motivations, various members of the community use the word 'permission' when describing their relationship, as a woman, with the great outdoors. Wonderful Wild Women, and the sense of collective agency it provides, has given them a license to explore these activities which they previously lacked.

As one member of the group puts it, *"There's a lot of women that feel like they need permission to take time for themselves and to be outside. And the community has certainly inspired a lot of women to understand that self-care is an important thing and to take that time out for them."*

As another member of the group explains, *"From my experience growing up, there's always been this sort of pitting women against each other [idea]. They're always in competition for whatever that might be. But I've more recently seen this real shift, and actually women going, 'No, we can support each other.' And women need female support and bonds."*

The message the group uses to empower each other is "It's just about showing up."

"There's a lot of women out there who just need the opportunity to get together with others and feel free to take a moment for themselves," Sarah explains. *"This is especially the case if women take a more caring role within their families; there are still a lot of societal pressures and expectations."*

"There was no question that my husband might not be able to carry on what he wanted to do [when our children were born]".

Through such gender politics, both domestic and institutional, women too frequently must work hard to establish a sense of autonomy - a sense of freedom that men might well take for granted.

Despite their far-reaching efforts, the task for Sarah and her fellow Wild Women is far from complete: *"I hope, over time, that a community*

like this wouldn't necessarily be needed, that it wouldn't even be second thought for a woman to go out and partake in an outdoor activity", she tells us, with an uncharacteristic note of sadness, continuing:

"I think the likeliness of that is fairly slim. I think there's always going to be something that will create a barrier in some respect".

This sense of realism does not stop her from striving to make a positive social impact, it simply drives her on to create more spaces for female empowerment.

Part of the way Wonderful Wild Women seek to help their members achieve this goal is to make people reconsider their potential as groups and individuals by offering them a new perspective on their everyday surroundings.

Gilly, a newly appointed Ambassador, talks about her activities as a 'wild woman' and their impact on how she perceives her surroundings:

"At the moment", she tells us, *"I'm swimming four or five days a week and I'll continue to do that so I'm catching each degree of [temperature] drop as it creeps towards the single figures. And today, the water felt quite heavy, but very soft and silky, and other days, the water is quite sharp and quite spiky. It's just different each time. But each time it's wonderful. And there's something quite empowering about getting into the cold water that you don't get from just swimming in a lake in the summer, because you've overcome something."*

Beyond this new, mindful perspective on their immediate surroundings, members of the Wonderful Wild Women find both the group dynamic and the action of performing physical activity outdoors beneficial to their state of mind.

As Julia, a member of the group puts it, *"Being out on the fells and running is my therapy."*

The form this therapy takes is the Wonderful Wild Women using the time and space offered by running, swimming and riding together to talk about issues and challenges in their own lives and offer mutual advice, sympathy and consolation.

Through this shared experience, group members *"can start to help each other out with stuff"*, as Julia puts it.

"That's really beneficial because then you don't feel alone."

As Vicky, who recently became an Ambassador tells us, *"Last winter, I just had a particularly difficult few months. I wasn't motivated to take part in my usual activity. And it was hard to just motivate myself to get out and do anything. But the one thing that kind of kept me going, and the only thing that I could do that I was driven to do for some reason, was to go and get in the cold water and spend time with Gilly and Sarah."*

Once there, the shared experience of wild swimming always had a transformational impact; both physically and mentally. It shifted a dial from despondency to hope. *"I would get into the water and it was like a switch, it was like a pop"*, she says. *"I definitely lived for that."*

"The only thing I could do this winter was just go to the lake, in the dark or in the snow. I literally just swam. And even for 30 seconds, it would change me for that day. It was setting me up to realise that I could cope with what was going on and I could share it with the people that were down there. And then they would tell me what was going on in their world and I would realise I wasn't alone, and then could carry on, basically."

For Vicky, her membership of the community was the most powerful tool she had to fight back against a difficult time too. *"Being out in the mountains and in the lakes changes your mindset"* she says, adding: *"You just become positive"*.

Creating the community
and participating in its events, has also proven therapeutic for Sarah:

"I just feel happier with my life. I'm excited to meet people and see what is next - what sort of opportunities are going to come out of meeting someone new through the community or someone I already know. Who knows what's possible?"

Sarah devolves various elements of running Wonderful Wild Women to others, encouraging them to organise events, create sub-groups and form new support networks, all with the aim of making both themselves and others feel more at ease with their involvement.

One of those who has taken on this responsibility is Gilly, for whom, like Sarah, part of the value of the community is discovering the positive impact it has had on the lives of others:

"What was really lovely was having complete strangers coming up and saying, 'Because of something that you said or because of something that we knew you've been able to do, it's encouraged me to do it as well.' And that's really special to know that you've helped someone who was having a bit of a hard time to get out of the hole they were in, and you've maybe given them a wee bit of a ladder to get out of that."

In her words, we can see the knock-on effect of positivity – a stranger finding encouragement in the words and actions of an inspirational person. For Gilly, knowing that she has developed this transformative potential is a great driver.

Beyond the core outdoor activities, the community now encompasses a diverse range of relationships and events which have motivated them to look outwards and examine how they as a community can help others: "We collaborate with local guides and businesses to help promote them, but also to help give an opportunity for people to engage with those companies, as well", explains Sarah.

"As a collective, as a community, we can hold these events and gatherings together and try something new. And equally, we have lots of social events, film nights, and we get speakers in [from outside the area] and celebrate women that are here in Cumbria doing quite inspiring things as well."

As well as engaging them with the local community, the Wonderful Wild Women's activities have connected them with the wider issue of humankind's environmental impact.

"We get really ragey in the summer with all the people that leave their barbecues and their crisp packets", explains one of the Wild Women.

And these feelings have inspired action which has expanded the community's activities. Rather than simply 'rage', they proactively care for the environments that give them so much:

"Most days in the summer when we're down at the lake swimming, or when we're out on the fells running, we're picking up rubbish and we're doing all that kind of stuff", she explains. *"It's kind of like showing that we can be custodians of this landscape and look after it for the next generation."*

And Then The World Changed...

Social distancing restricts communal exercise, so Sarah and the Wonderful Wild Women have come up with an interesting way to keep people active while also maintaining the essence of the community. The Virtual Run Club acts not only as a way for people to connect with others but also as a place for people to share their experiences during this very uncertain time. In doing so, the community has managed to recreate both its social and therapeutic role in the lives of its members.

"Every Saturday we do, like, a virtual run club. So, yes, just trying to still encourage people, even if they're only still managing once a week or what not to get out and share with us what they're getting up to. It's just trying to keep a bit of a presence so that people know that, if they're having any problems or, you know, they need to reach out and they don't have anyone, then there's still a community there that they can do that, and trying to reinforce that a little bit."

Sarah understands that the current situation has created a lot of uncertainty and while on the surface everyone appears to be going through a similar experience, circumstances are very different. Her way to support people is to give them an outlet that will boost their morale - the virtual run. It not only gives people a motivation to get out and exercise but also a sense of communal solidarity:

"We're all very different, have very different lives. Some of us have kids. I'm still working, so I'm trying to work from home as well. Others are self-employed, so they've literally had nothing, in terms of work or income or things like that. So, it was just trying to share that there are all these different kinds of situations going on, and how we were, sort of, trying to deal with it, to try and help and maybe give other people a bit of a boost and a morale lift. Then, I started with the virtual run club each Saturday"

The lockdown has forced Sarah to really examine and appreciate her immediate surroundings. It has changed her perspective, having previously felt the need to drive to find a beautiful trail. Instead, she has learned just to step out of her house and appreciate what's around her. Ultimately, this has made her rethink her future behaviour and helped her find the value in taking time to notice what's around you.

Although she covers less ground geographically, her personal horizons are expanding:

"[An effect of the pandemic is] maybe to just get people to think a little bit about what they were doing previously and just, sort of, appreciate what's around them. It might make us all think [differently] in the future. Like, I used to drive for a good hour to go for a run around in the Lake District. Actually, I've been forced now to, sort of, run from home, and I've found all these great trails and things like that from the door."

The lockdown has also given cause for introspection. In considering the role that Wonderful Wild Women plays in the lives of its members, Sarah has come to consider that we, as a society, may have taken living a slow, purposeful life for granted.

The lockdown has given a lot of people the opportunity to slow down and really live within themselves at a pace that really allows for a determined and focused way of living:

"I know that a lot of my friends are enjoying taking things a bit slower. Even though we're, kind of, quite connected to the outdoors and we can get there quite easily, you know, we have the same busy lives and stuff that most people end up with and you just feel like you're rushing around everywhere. So, then, you also feel like you have to be, sort of, making the most of every good day. So, yes, I'm just finding you're, sort of, trying to reach further and further and go further and do all these things, and yes, just, now, a bit more time to reassess that."

Lockdown Collective
Hull

Hull's selection as the 2017 UK City of Culture has altered perceptions. As the home of renowned poets, guitarists and social reformists, it had always punched above its cultural weight in lots of ways, but without proportionate recognition.[26]

This oversight is more acute for practitioners of certain artforms: while grime music is booming in London, Manchester and Birmingham,[27] it's still a niche scene with a limited history in Hull.[28]

The Lockdown Collective, run by MCs and producers Chiedu and Deezkid and their DJ, DJ Joe, are aiming to expand this tight-knit local scene.

Before this collective of rap and grime artists emerged, the most prominent part of Hull's musical heritage was indie rock:

"Historically," Cheidu explains, *"Hull's been known for bands. So, we've had the Housemartins, the Paddingtons, Beautiful South. They've all come from Hull. David Bowie's guitarist Mick Ronson was from Hull. Roland Gift's from Hull soil. There's always been a little bit of a history about bands and it's still like that now. It's still band-centric."*

Before Lockdown the hip-hop scene in Hull was led by artists such as Red Eye, Player War and Lamp, but nothing that enjoyed the reach and popularity of Lockdown Collective.

The group's story began when Chiedu hooked up with two friends to make music:

"The history really boils down to about 15 years ago in a friend of mine called Donnie Craft [aka Crafty]'s bedroom," he explains. *"I think his mum bought him a sort of boombox and you could press a few buttons and random instrumentals would come on. And he, at that time, was really into rap. He was obviously heavily influenced by, like Eminem and stuff. And he'd wrote a few tracks what was circling around MSN messenger and stuff. And obviously he was one of my good mates and I thought it was sick; I thought it was really cool what he was doing, and I wanted to get involved. So, I tried. But back then I used to rap in an American accent."*

Although it wasn't unusual for British rappers to adopt the mannerisms of bigger artists from the US at the time, Chiedu and his peers emerging in Hull had other ideas: *"Crafty was just like, 'You know what? You are sick, you need to cut out the American accent,' so I did."*

Along with another friend called Rory, who proudly came up with the name 'Lockdown', the first iteration of the group performed a few gigs locally and recorded a few demos before going their separate ways.

Now flying the Lockdown Collective flag alone, Chiedu beat his own path: *"I released my mixtape, just backpack on, going around the streets selling CDs. I think I sold over 300 copies of that. Just good nagging people on the streets just to buy the CD or going to nightclubs and just talking to people."*

While Chiedu was busy building the bones of a loyal fan base in Hull, Deezkid was beating a similar path into music: *"I did the mixtape before I knew [Chiedu] as well."*

A few years earlier, Deezkid's mum had bought him a basic, duel-CD mixing deck, which he would use to loop the tracks of artists such as Dizzee Rascal and Wiley so that he could rhyme over the instrumental breaks. He also *"tried college for about five weeks"* and worked as a glass collector in a nightclub, mainly so he could talk to the DJs working there, while always making beats with cracked software and writing lyrics on the side.

As a 17- or 18-year-old, now making his own tracks, he discovered Chiedu: *"I remember getting into a random car [and hearing his tape]. I was like, 'Who is this guy?' I didn't know him at all. I liked it. It was real, raw. I was like, 'I need to make beats for that guy.'"* Deezkid reached out to him through Facebook, suggesting they work together on a track.

Lockdown Collective is embedded in its local community, an ethos which harks back to their origins and the help they received to get on their feet. A key breakthrough came when Deezkid began volunteering at a local youth centre that offers young people access to a recording studio: *"I was just like a bedroom producer, really, until my equipment broke, [and I] couldn't really afford any more. So, that's when I started volunteering at the Warren [youth club]."*

In exchange for handling all the bookings for the studio, as well as recording and mixing some of the artists who came in, Deezkid could use the space for free, mostly to make tracks with Cheidu. The studio at the youth centre wasn't exactly 'professional standard' but it was the launchpad needed for the Collective to take off: *"It's a great place because between 16 and 25 you could basically use that studio for free, no charge, no nothing,"* explains Cheidu.

"So, I used to go there all the time. [Deezkid] used to make the beats, and then we made a song called Dumb and Dumber. And that's when the resurrection of Lockdown happened. And then yeah, the rest is history I suppose."

From that point onwards, Lockdown Collective grew a cult local following, becoming renowned with Hull's fans and aspiring rap artists alike. Airplay on BBC 1Xtra for their track `2017' signalled a definitive leap up the food chain. But Lockdown feel they have more to achieve, and the group has become a focus for its founders' profound sense of purpose and ambition:

"It just needs to be a little bit stronger," Cheidu reckons. *"It needs to be a bit more professional; [we need to be] a bit more consistent with our releases and stuff."*

This sense of purpose is just as powerfully focused on helping others around the collective.

When he met Deezkid, Cheidu was working as a sports tutor at an alternative education provision in the West of the city, something which shines through in his continuing enthusiasm for supporting young people, and up and coming artists especially.

Part of this involves engaging with the younger generation:

"The youth just really warm to us" explains Cheidu. *"I think, it's just, they think we're speaking their language, basically."*

The ability to communicate with the younger generation is informed by the social dynamics of growing up in Hull, as Deezkid says:

"Growing up in Hull, on different council estates, it was just kids on the street causing havoc, gang chases, playing block, mums on the doorsteps smirking and shouting at the kids. Do you know what? I wouldn't change it because I just had so much fun. It was all just having a laugh and being mischievous. I loved it. I proper loved it."

Chiedu has hopes of bettering the local community through music.

"Hull is a very working-class place with a lot of poverty," **he says.** "No one's really got much ambition in Hull. Everyone just assumes they have to do the same things. There's plenty of bricklayers, electricians, plumbers. You can find that in abundance in Hull, but what about actual creative hope? There's not many people that grow up and think, 'I want to be a musician'."

"Hull is a place with so much potential. It could easily be one of the top thriving cities in the UK, but the defeatist mentality of the people has held them back."

Fighting against the imbalance of economic and political power in the UK, especially Hull and its above average unemployment rate,[29] the Lockdown Collective are actively taking steps to change the status quo for the city's most deprived residents.

The community of artists is doing all it can provide a powerful platform for Hull's aspiring creatives, inviting them to share in their success, not keeping it for themselves.

"This year I had the opportunity to headline the festival," says Chiedu, *"but instead of me taking all the limelight, I wanted to invite all the rappers who aren't as big as me at the moment and let them have a song each on my set."*

Unfazed at the notion that such generosity might limit their own ascent in the industry, Lockdown Collective are determined to empower others: *"It's not just about Lockdown, it's about feeding the next generation."*

Focussing on rap's transformative potential for social change, through his lyrics as well as the actions of the collective, he wants to *"change it up and talk about the things we should be proud of and the things we could do"*.

Lockdown Collective's desire to give something back is inspiring others, and is a sign of a wider commitment in the city. During a daytime visit to the Aldelphi Club - the undisputed home of live music in Hull, where Lockdown would perform later that night - Cheidu sourced quotes to hire a PA system for a nearing performance in a school across town. Jumping in, the club's manager offered up a system for free.

Chiedu takes great pride in this ability to make a positive social impact:

"I know that I am a role model and I was put on this earth to spark change in my community."

This commitment to uplift a wider community is apparent in everything Lockdown does. It is an attitude that has united them with a wide network of like-minded people in the city. Approachable and ever present, everyone in Hull seems to know them.

Kaz, the owner of the local clothing shop Poorboy Boutique, talks warmly of Lockdown, as do others from the informal meshwork of local shops, eateries, venues and designers that support each other.

More broadly, grassroots communities are stimulated by a willingness to embrace diversity. During the Lockdown Collective's grime nights in the infamous Adelphi, the audience is eclectic:

"On our nights, we bring all the different cliques together," says Chiedu. Focusing on the music and away from divisive characteristics, Chiedu sums up the inclusive spirit of Lockdown's live shows:

"The nights attract young hipsters, chavs, all sorts of people. It's just a 'kick off your shoes, get your trainers on, tie your hair up, let's not worry, no judgement vibe."

And Then The
World Changed...

While the musicians are using this time to better their own skills, they're also finding new ways to create the community spirit that's intrinsic to their artistic identity and language. They're still taking a distinctive approach to the online vs offline, or physical vs digital dichotomy facing every community today, that has been heightened by the COVID lockdown.

Through virtual 'Sound Clashes', they're not only able to express themselves musically but also able to give their fans and wider community an interactive musical experience:

"We've even been sound clashing each other", explains Cheidu. *"I'm actually the king at the moment because I beat Deezy and I beat Joe. So, basically what happens is someone will go on Instagram Live and say, 'Play a track that reminds you of when you were younger.' We'll both play a track and then the people in the comments decide who had the best track. So, we'll do five tracks each."*

During the pandemic, the musicians have taken an intrinsic part of their ethos – building a unified society around them – and put it into action by redoubling their efforts to promote local businesses to their fanbase.

This vision of togetherness is not only specific to the crisis, but an effort to authentically foster a sense of community that will last beyond it:

"We've just really helped him. We've just said, like, 'Go eat at Yankee Land. It's good food, good family business, it's been running for over 30 years. Like, go support a local lad.' A lot of people have jumped on the bandwagon and sort of been eating his food, so he's been sort of lucky."

"[We've been doing that on] some podcasts as well, so we've got a couple of local businesses we've interviewed and tried to basically ask them the question that you're asking us. Like, how has the Corona affected their business and stuff?"

Lockdown Collective don't have adequate home equipment to make their music and, because they can't go to the studio, they have had to pause their work as recording artists. However, they are using this time to make their social media presence stronger, and hone their skills in a way they may never have done if they were able to record music as normal:

"I think, content-wise, it definitely is going to make us stronger. Like, social media content, because that was always our weaker side. Like, not bigging us up, but I reckon we've got personalities to create good content. Just, like, technically none of us could really edit videos or ought like that, but I've been learning a bit of that while I've been in my house as well. So, I reckon our content is going to get better online"

With unprecedented restrictions comes the visceral realisation that freedom is not to be taken for granted. And with it, the Lockdown Collective's desire to live a fearless existence:

"I'm never going to take my freedom and anything for granted ever again. I think this has definitely showed me now that you've just got to be fearless. Not saying that we weren't fearless anyway, but extra fearless. You can't take nothing for granted, man, nothing"

iv

Opening Doors
London

Elderly people in the UK regularly face issues of isolation and loneliness, and these issues affect older LGBT+ people disproportionately.[30]

Opening Doors is a charity born from a grassroots movement in the 1990s and early 2000s that sets out to "enable older LGBT+ people to live happy, healthy, and independent lives that are free from loneliness, isolation, prejudice and discrimination".

It's now an independent charity, the largest in the UK dedicated to servicing this segment of the population. It comprises an incredibly rich tapestry of individuals and groups that bond over shared histories and hopes for the future, including active members Michael, and friends Jane and Helen.

One of Opening Doors London's most powerful weapons against isolation is a befriending service, which unites members of the elderly LGBT+ community with each other or younger volunteers.

Jane and Helen met through this service, with Jane 'befriending' Helen, who had reached out to the charity after picking up a leaflet in her local GP surgery.

The pair perhaps aren't an obvious match, as they themselves keenly point out. Now in her 60s, Jane enjoyed a relatively privileged childhood before a career in publishing led her to open Silver Moon Women's Bookshop on Charing Cross Road, which was *"the biggest women's bookshop in Europe"*.

Helen is a similar age but looks older and frailer. She recounts a childhood and adolescence in Newcastle:

"My parents were very working class. My father was a trade unionist; he worked on the railways for a long time."

A shared commitment to socialist values connects her and Jane, who similarly fears the re-emergence of right-wing politics across Europe and the US in recent years.

But their strongest connection is their shared sexuality. Explaining her decision to volunteer with Opening Doors initially, Jane says:

"You know, it's my community, the obvious thing to do is to put any service into my own community. Because after all, if we don't do it, then who will?"

When they first met, the pair walked in a London park, talking politics and sharing stories.

"It seemed to spiral after that. We started to talk," explains Helen.

From that starting point, their connection deepened, and, as it did, the pair's friendship became more multifaceted and outgoing; an example of how Opening Doors guides its members away from a shuttered, isolated, closeted existence:

"By getting to know Helen," explains Jane, *"[I have] somebody who I can have days out with, a mate to go to the movies with. And we started off having coffee, hot chocolate, at [Helen's] place, and we graduated to the pub and then a concert, and we both have a great interest in film, so we go to movies together. We've been to art galleries together, photography shows. And you suggest some things, I suggest some things."*

Although the mutual benefits of Jane and Helen's friendship are immediately apparent, the impact of the befriending service is perhaps best illustrated through a glimpse of elderly LGBT+ life without such social avenues.

Michael is an active member of his local elderly LGBT+ community who has witnessed first-hand just how devastating these dynamics can be.

When Michael began to volunteer with Opening Doors, he befriended a man who was forced to look at the world differently in a very short space of time.

"The gentleman I visit now," he explains, *"he'd been with his partner for 50 years. They travelled the world. Both had very interesting jobs. His partner died three years ago. He fell over at the funeral, broke his hip, and then fell over again at home and broke his pelvis. So within a year he'd gone from having a home life and traveling – they'd been on the Queen Mary the year before to New York – to being completely isolated at home. And nobody knew. He just hadn't seen anybody for six months. Somebody suggested this befriending service to him."*

In conversation in his kitchen in North London, he points out the other, subtler ways that isolation and loneliness emerge:

"If you look at somebody who's having to rely on carers or even meals on wheels, very often somebody [the carer] will try and strike up a conversation with the person that they're visiting. It would normally be, 'How long is it since your wife died?', if you're talking about an elderly gentleman." From there, *"in the heterosexual community"*, Michael extrapolates a conversation about children and grandchildren, and *"this whole ricochet of questions that come from that"*.

This creates a social barrier if the person answering the questions is LGBT+:

"In this case, you can't answer any of those questions [and often] you don't want to answer them because of the negativity that can come with it."

"[It's] the conversation, the 'coming out' thing, which we all do throughout our lives", **Michael explains,** "because you don't come out once." **Instead, faced with the questions of a stranger,** "you have to come out again and say, 'Well, actually my partner was a guy and he died a couple of years ago and I've been on my own [ever since].'"

For many people, it is easier just to avoid these situations altogether:

"More people go back in the closet when they get older," explains Michael. *"They've spent their whole lives trying to get out of the closet, then finally it's just easier to get back in the closet and just say, 'Oh, no, I'm single.' You don't get into a conversation, you put the photograph of your partner away in a drawer because the question is, 'Is that your brother or is that you when you were younger?' The explanation always has to come out as a coming out process."*

Jane recognises similar issues:

"The loneliness and isolation in the gay and lesbian community has the added layer that you might be of a certain age and you might be living alone, and you don't necessarily want to run around saying, 'Hey, I'm a lesbian.' And every single new person you meet is a new coming out situation. And sometimes that can be either very tiring because you've been doing it all your life or scary because you're not quite sure what reaction you're going to get."

Similarly, Helen sought to break free of her flat by contacting the charity. Previously, she'd attempted to reach out into her community without their assistance but struggled to do so as she feared physical attack on account of her sexuality - something she had experienced before.

She endured an "isolating" sense that her *"lifestyle has been totally different to the people in the block of flats I live in."* Approaching 'old age', she no longer felt comfortable where she had once felt at home, surrounded by friends.

It was at this point that she met Jane, through the Opening Doors movement. In doing so, Helen began to re-establish bonds with her environment and the people in it; to feel at home once more. *"She kept me sane, actually"*, she explains. She no longer felt *"cut off"* from her *"own community"*. *"That's why I really appreciated Opening Doors",* she says.

This uncertainty means that any new social interaction is fraught with anxiety. For some, the option to retreat from society into the comfort of solitude is preferable.

In conversation with Michael, it soon becomes clear the wider LGBT+ community does not provide an automatic solution:

"The gay community is very ageist'" he says. *"I mean, it's all about youth. So what happens to all of us when we're no longer youths? That's where we all become invisible. I think that's where the isolation comes from. I mean that's my view, but I think it's an accurate view."*

Before meeting Helen, Jane was feeling isolated from her surroundings, spending time alone in her 16th floor flat rather than getting the best use out of her bus pass, but the invitation to meet with Helen changed that:

"It's a prompt to get out of the house, be with a friend, and do some of the many, many things that London has to offer. It's simple and it's profound."

Michael recognises similar benefits, and believes the community has a vital role to play in helping people avoid isolation in old age.

He attends social coffee mornings, another cornerstone of the charity's services, as well as volunteering as a befriender to others.

Far from the anxiety of interacting with strangers, these social interactions bring with them the comforting expectation of acceptance, and the knowledge that everyone can be themselves.

"These people that we befriend," he explains, *"very often have nobody of the same sexuality to discuss anything with. Just to be able to say, you know, 'When my partner was alive, we went to New York.' I mean just something as simple as that, but [also] to say his name."*

Recognising that the resulting experience of loneliness and isolation is an all too common component of old age, Opening Doors and its supporters set out to demolish as many barriers to acceptance as they can. 'Befrienders' and 'beneficiaries' share experiences of rejection or exclusion, and what it feels like to continually justify your existence to others. This shared knowledge of intolerance is the driving force behind the community's ethos of acceptance.

Helen and Jane explain how this shared experience helps them, as members of the community, find mutual support on this common ground:

"All the lesbians, we have all of that background history, although it was lived differently," says Jane. *"We understand that basic shorthand communication and that's a basis on which to build."*

Her desire to connect with other lesbians doesn't mean she only wishes to build friendships amongst those with comparable histories, it's just she finds it comforting to know her own history and orientation is accepted by those she meets within the group.

The importance of shared histories and comparable experiences is a factor in the success of Opening Door's coffee mornings too. For those who can leave their homes, *"the coffee morning is a sort of a touchstone,"* Michael tells us. *"People come in every Friday. Very often they split off into groups after the coffee morning and they go to Quakers House across the road and have lunch together, or to various places; but it's a touchstone each week where you can meet your friends or acquaintances."*

For those living alone or in isolating circumstances, there is a common rejection of intolerance and promotion of acceptance at these events that creates invaluable opportunities to talk openly and without fear of discrimination or misunderstanding:

"It's a joyous environment actually, as anybody who comes will see", Michael tells us. *"It's just a real social event where people can chat about anything, they want without anybody misunderstanding what they're saying. Everybody comes from the same place and the same history and the same sexual backgrounds. I think for me, it's a complete eye-opener."*

Through this project and their continued activism, they are hopeful that pressures which force some elderly members of the LGBT+ community back 'into the closet', and into isolation, will diminish.

"You have to put yourself out [there] a bit more," explains Helen. *"I think in an odd way we have become very insular. We're frightened to put ourselves forward [and] talk to other people."*

She is hopeful that *"lesbians and gay men see there is more publicity"* available to them. *"Why?"*, she asks; because she wants to *"make sure that certain communities get that you are there. And I am there."*

As she sees it, the more outgoing her community is, the more visible it becomes, and the more visible the community becomes, the more recognition and, crucially, support it will receive. Hopefully, then, fewer of her fellow elderly LGBT+ people struggle with isolation and loneliness.

Helen agrees with the need to move beyond their current circles of influence to have a bigger impact: *"My hope for the community is that [we have] more things like [Opening Doors] to get the publicity down to the people who need it; not just in London, but starting to broaden [out]. Because, even round London, you've got small towns where people are so isolated. [I hope] to get in touch with people down there."*

Although she initially searched for an antidote to her own isolation, Helen is now working to spread the word and create a ripple effect of positive human connection.

She's restless, too: *"[I'm] trying to get rid of the complacency that we're doing everything we can right now,"* she explains. *"It's a good thing [that everything is happening], but when you think 'We're doing fine' [you] become complacent. Now, complacent is the worst thing we could become because we forget that other people are still suffering."*

For Helen and Jane, their engagement with Opening Doors London is a chapter in a long story of the struggle, and their personal struggle, for LGBT+ equality. Jane proudly tells us she opened her bookshop in 1984, *"with the blessing of Ken Livingston's GLC"*. The store remained open for eighteen years, *"and by the time we'd finished, we were the biggest women's bookshop in Europe,"* she says.

With Silver Moon, Jane set out to create two things: *"a) a successful bookshop, and b) a visible, proud, open, accessible and friendly face of feminism and lesbianism, slap bang in the middle of London."*

This project began after she was made redundant from her role at a publishing company that was taken over by Robert Maxwell.

Having enjoyed the privileges of public, private and university education, almost overnight her *"whole outlook on life was suddenly very difficult and quite politicised"*. With her *"middle class"* existence shattered and unsure what to do with her life, she soon *"discovered feminism"* and a new partner, with whom she established the bookstore.

Encouraged by Jane's story, Helen goes back further in time, discussing movements which influenced the activism seen during the 1980s:

"There was the Vietnam war and stuff like this, and men's gay rights in '67 had started, had opened a door", she tells us.

But *"women's politics didn't really start till about the late 60's, early 70's when we all started to become feminists. Socialist Feminists."*

For someone who grew up amongst the shipyards of Newcastle and the North East, just before globalisation and new technology decimated local industry, Helen is reflective on her place in the world:

"I started questioning what it was about, being a woman, but also being an out-and-out lesbian. A working-class lesbian, which, at the time, a lot of people didn't think existed. They knew there were working class lesbians, but they didn't think we were pertinent and that was the saddest thing."

Refusing to be marginalised, she *"started to formulate the idea that [she] wanted to join the feminist movement."* Borrowing ideas emerging in the US, she found power in the intersection of ideas around activism on issues of class, gender and sexuality:

"We squatted for a little while," she recalls, *"and we did other things. We started opening lesbian squats, especially around Vauxhall. We didn't feel isolated, we were trying to do something."*

For Helen, however, widespread change didn't come quickly enough, and she developed an addiction to alcohol, before successfully overcoming it in middle-age.

"A lot of the people that I met around that time were all chronic alcoholics," she tells us. *"Some of them thought themselves as failures, we weren't going forward enough, booze was the way out."*

But things have evolved since then, as Jane explains: "Things do change but they change very slowly. If you look at Gay Pride for example, the first Gay Pride march was a lesbian strength march I went on. There were 300 of us, all terrified. Lots of police and we weren't quite sure if the police were there to arrest you or protect you. There wasn't much hostility from the people on the street, they were just looking, thinking 'who on earth are those people.'

Now Gay Pride is this massive festival, sponsored by Barclays Bank and representatives of the police are there. So, there is a huge amount more acceptance [today], and I think that the next generation down, I'm pleased to say, would be horrified if they had to go through the stuff we had to go through."

As this generation enters its twilight years, there is a danger that their achievements will slip from our shared social memory. In this negative pocket of time, members of the elderly LGBT+ community are more likely than many others to recede into isolation. It's this chasm that Opening Doors London aims to fill.

For Helen, who met Jane when suffering from isolation and depression, this social exchange remains a lifeline.

"It's about friendship," she says. *"I don't agree with some of the things she says, and she doesn't agree with me, but we're building a bond of friendship and that's the most important thing about Opening Doors to me."*

According to Jane, we could all learn something from their friendship. She would *"like to get back to the notion that we have a caring society."*

In Jane's view, we need to be thinking more *"about creating a society where there's the age-old thing of 'treating other people the way you would like to be treated yourself.'* It's not hard," she tells us, *"it's a very simple message. It's been around for several thousand years, and more."*

Reflecting on the changes she has witnessed in her lifetime, Jane tells us that, *"Happily, these days reactions [to me sharing my sexuality] are much better."* However, she's adamant there is a long way to go: *"You know, we don't want tolerance. Acceptance is better. The whole thing not being an issue would be even better."*

Despite the challenges they have faced, neither Jane nor Helen claims to have had to work especially hard to gain acceptance, pointing to issues of intersectional discrimination.

Jane draws attention to *"what black lesbians went through, and Asian lesbians. It's never been chronicled. It's never been looked at. But some of the stories were horrendous."*

Helen agrees with her, saying, *"If you think that white women had got it bad, they had it 10 times and even 15 times worse than what we had. And I think we haven't looked at that. We haven't looked at different communities. Especially now as they're getting older as well."*

And Then The
World Changed...

During lockdown, members of Opening Doors need support on multiple levels. Some are unable to get the resources they need; others don't have the means to communicate during lockdown. Support here is multifaceted, because people need physical support (such as mobile phones and the internet) in order to maintain contact with Opening Doors, so that the charity can provide social and psychological support, ensuring that people remain in contact and socially connected.

Meghan, who leads volunteer outreach programmes for the charity, explains the new reality:

"Volunteers have even bought their members phones, because some people don't even have a phone and that's still the situation for a couple people"

"We've had a bank of volunteers who have been calling our postal members to check in on them, sorting out things like emergency food parcels, helping them with all of that stuff, because they don't have the internet, they don't have a computer"

"I've got one member who I've still not spoken to since lockdown and it breaks my heart. I sent him a letter in the post, because this is another member who we need to get a phone, and I said, like, 'Would you be open if we sent you a mobile phone?' but until he writes back-, we sent him a pre-paid envelope. It's just so sad to think that that's the reality right now. Because he did have an email address, but he would use the computer at our offices, so now he's obviously not getting to our offices to use the computer"

The lockdown has given rise to challenges both for the charity as an organisation and its members as a community and individuals. Many members require IT support to adjust to the new digital way of communicating. Opening Doors has had to build an online system to cater to the new demands for digital interactions. Interestingly, the need to go digital has highlighted the challenges that a lack of internet access creates for members. This motivated Opening Doors to streamline their processes, so that beyond lockdown they're able to work more efficiently and cater to the differing needs of their members:

"I don't think we did enough planning upfront, so, all of a sudden, everyone was in the office and them, bam, we were all at home, and there wasn't that transition of getting ready for this. Then, all of a sudden, we had all of my members that were receiving face-to-face that I had to concentrate on getting them to be receiving phone calls and making sure their volunteers could be doing phone calls and they could receive phones"

The challenges faced by members with the sudden situation change – access and education:

"I spoke to a guy and he got a new phone, and he was like, 'I got this because I really wanted to understand how to use Zoom. My friends are talking about Zoom groups', and he can't, for the life of him, work out how to use Zoom on his phone and you're trying to talk them through it. It's not like you can then send a volunteer or send somebody to then give him that IT support. So, when you don't already have those skills, how are you then going to upskill yourself?"

"Like I say, I've even got clients that don't even have a telephone…We were not prepared at all for this to happen"

Like Lockdown Collective, the ways in which Opening Doors has risen to the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown will benefit their community in future:

"Everything that was paper-based is now online and it's streamlined, and I think that everything, for me, system-wise and process-wise, couldn't be going far better and far more improved, and I think a lot of this I'm going to take back to the office. Same with-, you know, we've got a lot of people with mobility issues and I think that this has really emphasised the need for being far more disability and mobility friendly. So, I think it's going to have massive, massive, massive benefits in terms of our offering and our support for different people"

As a result of the crisis, the UK has seen a peak in volunteering efforts, and that has greatly benefited Opening Doors. More people have become aware of the initiative and are trying to do their part by becoming involved. As Opening Doors has had to switch to online groups — not only people in London but those from across the UK will now have access to the service and support.

"We had, obviously, done a big drive for volunteers and we had a massive, massive influx of volunteers. I think 160 people have applied"

"We've got over 60 people on our waiting list, but normally, we wouldn't even match 60 people in three years"

The pandemic has also demonstrated the need for Opening Doors to grow their presence so that they can connect with people across the UK and provide support on a larger scale:

"I do have, now, clients across the UK, albeit a smaller portion. But, now we can, through online groups, we can start opening up to all of these people across the UK"

However underneath this silver lining, Opening Doors members face significant disadvantages which threaten both them as individuals, and the organisation's existence as a whole. People within this community who were already marginalised from society and have physical and mental ailments are facing even more detachment and discrimination during this time, exacerbated by the effects of isolation.

While others in disadvantaged positions may be receiving enhanced support, Opening Doors members generally are not, and those who are often find that the care is not tailored to their needs. Their contextual, situational, and cultural background needs to be taken into consideration:

"I've got a member that was referred to me by his mental health outreach worker. She then went on maternity leave and they didn't replace her, because the funding had been cut in his area. So, then he didn't have his-, because he wasn't deemed high-risk enough, and now this member tried to commit suicide, last week, that I've been working with. That is directly because of, you know, service cuts to mental health and this person now isn't seeing anybody and is completely on their own, and no one is going to be getting to them except the police who are calling him each day because he's on high-risk watch. That's the reality of what's happening here, is that we're talking about the most vulnerable that don't get government support and now they're completely on their own with their thoughts in their heads"

There are many economic, physical and environmental hurdles for the community and its members to overcome during this time:

"We were already talking about a cohort that were so forgotten by society, because I've got loads of my members that have always been in council properties, but they're on the top floor of the flat, and now their mobility's gone. They already couldn't get up the stairs, they're already housebound and now, trying to then go out and get their shopping because they couldn't-, you're only supposed to do, say one trip a week, but they can't actually carry that food upstairs. Then you get them food parcels, but the food parcels aren't any of the food that they wanted or that fit with their dietary requirements. Then, with the mutual aid groups, you have to fill in a form online, but people then don't have a computer to fill that in online. It's just a whole host of barriers non-stop for a generation that isn't technological."

"I had this member that said to me, 'You're saying for me to stay inside for my safety, but I feel less safe. I feel more anxious. I've never felt worse, and you're saying this is for my benefit, but I don't see the benefit in this at all.' I think it's really, really sad that we had these amazing listings that were going out every month, you know, keeping people engaged and now, they're not getting that and they're detached from the only source of community that they had. I think that's really, really sad."

V

The British Asian Society,
University of Sheffield

The leap when moving from school to university is a big one, especially for young people moving away from home for the first time.

In fresher's week, the scramble to form new social connections, and entirely new social units begins. This can be a daunting, so student societies are a lifeline, with over three hundred at the University of Sheffield.

The Sheffield University British Asian Society started life as a WhatsApp group chat. When the founders requested to register the society officially, some within the university hierarchy were fearful it would prove divisive, but this is something that the committee has always fought to avoid.

After successfully making their case, the group now enjoys official endorsement from the Student Union, making it one of a handful of British Asian university societies across the UK.

Amara thinks there are two reasons why people join: *"One, they fit into that cultural niche of 'the British-Asians' and want to meet other people and socialise and see what it's about. Two, the people who don't identify [as British Asian] but want to see what this culture is about and expose [themselves to the] heritage and all the different things that we're doing. They wanted to know a bit more."*

Currently, much of the Society's recruitment comes from pre-formed friendship groups, but they also rely on word of mouth to grow. After almost two years as an active force within the university, the Society's key members are confident that next year's committee members will be perfectly placed to grow the group's membership and influence into the future.

Amara reveals the process by which the British Asian Society was formed: *"To form a society at university, you have to have a president, a secretary, a treasurer, and an inclusions officer.*

The president is, obviously, as you know, at the top of the list. I felt my initial role [as secretary] put us very on-par with each other. Then, there's the treasurer, to obviously account for the society's funding, and their memberships and tidying up all the money. The inclusion officer is obviously there to promote to the rest of university that we are an inclusive society. Aside from that, there are other roles you could be. There's the vice president, events manager, but the first ones are the only members that you need to qualify as a society."

Underneath these structures lies complex power dynamics. Kav, the current President animatedly speaks of the plotting and scheming that almost killed-off the ambition in the first place: *"One of the girls that was in charge of the Students Union last year was like, 'Oh, there was a lot of trouble getting the society approved, because presidents of other societies came for it and said, 'You can't let this society be a thing. Is it going to be viable? How can it make money?' Loads of these questions were, like pushed down her throat."*

Amara explains that the registration of the society had to be approved by the International Students Committee:

"They had to have a vote, and there were opinions and things saying, 'Why is there a British Asian Society? It'll only divide people. Why are you trying to put labels on people?' Then the Pakistani Society went to the International Students Committee and said, 'Oh, no. This society will only be divisive to our university,' and things like that. There were at least three or four out of twelve [voting] who objected towards our society and had an idea that it would divide more people. People were saying that only people of South Asian [heritage] can join, but obviously that does not happen in the Society. Everyone who wants to turn up will turn up and will never be turned away. There was a lot of friction at the beginning. Not hostility, but there was kind of tension in the air between us and the Pakistani Society on that."

In a separate conversation, Anu recalls a similar story: *"The people that had problems with it were the cultural societies that already existed. So, Indian Society, Pakistani Society; they couldn't see why we wanted to create a society that was just British born folk. Because it does seem that it's a very exclusive [idea]. But that's exactly the opposite of what we are trying to do."*

Amara fought against the tension by suggesting the societies work together. *"I was trying to convince them that we can do good, and I was trying to say, 'We can hold an event this year [together].'"* She also spoke about the inclusive, rather than exclusive, ambition of the society. Her proposed collaboration never transpired but, as a *"fresh bunch of people with different ideas"*, they gained support of the International Students Committee and were officially recognised in 2018.

The British Asian Society was formed by a group who had attended other cultural societies but did not feel they 'fitted in'. They came to realise they related most closely with others who identify as British Asian, rather than with people who identify with singular ethnicities only. As Amara, a key founder puts it: *"I felt that even though I'm a British Pakistani, I'm still related more to the British-Indians I met than I did with actual Pakistanis and [people from] the native countries."*

Chalal, who recently became a member, shares his experience:

"In my first year, I actually went to a lot of cultural events, like India Society, Pakistani Society, stuff like that. But I found that I didn't always have many things in common with people in those societies because most students were international students, basically, and they grew up in a completely different world to most people who are British and Asian. And they had different mindsets, have different interests, stuff like that. So I thought this [British Asian] society was really interesting and would allow me to meet like-minded people."

Amara adds:

"I would really classify as a mix between a British person and an Asian person. I wouldn't feel that I was fitting 100% with the Pakistan Society. Also, there's not really a British Society on-site. Then again, I have my cultural differences; I pick and choose what I have from both of them, and all the people who are 'like me' relate in that way. We have our own little niche culture, but there wasn't a place for us [before we formed this Society]."

In this view, which is broadly representative of the group, the combination of British and Asian experiences during childhood creates a distinctive British Asian identity.

Anu, another founding member, attributes this divide to a 'culture gap':

"It can't really be defined by, like, one kind of thing," she says. *"It's like a bunch of different things. For me personally, it was just like, growing up differently so that you watched different TV programs; you've grown up eating different foods, wearing different things, listening to different music, that kind of stuff. It's the small stuff really that, like, makes people click with each other. That kind of cultural gap."*

The founding members had all experienced similar cultural dynamics and bonded over their distinct but overlapping British Asian identities and affinities. As the committee members developed their idea, African Caribbean societies at various UK universities acted as a model.

As Kav, current President of the British Asian society, explains:

"There's a whole group of people that, I would say, are like me. They're classified like coconuts; someone who's brown, but has grown up white, essentially. I was like, 'This is [similar in some respects to] the African Caribbean society. It's just, like a mishmash of everyone.' And I thought that this could be something like that. And that's what I'm interested in doing."

The British Asian Society members are grappling with connections to countries from which their parents or grandparents emigrated and using these connections to form their own identities.

None of their experiences are identical, but there are commonalities. Almost every society member is searching for connections to Asian cultures and societies. By doing so, they realise they are not as connected to these places and cultural traditions as others, especially international students, who grew up there:

"I'm Tamil," Kav tells us, *"which is an ethnic group, and I went to Tamil Society [here at university]. I was like, 'I have a lot of Tamil family, not so much Tamil friends. Let me check it out. This is something where maybe I can make some friends.'"* Upon arriving, he realised that *"everyone was way more in touch with their roots and their culture."*

Everyone was openly speaking Tamil, but he had only ever done that with family, never with friends. *"They were talking about movies, actors, music, food and all sorts. I think maybe some of the foods was there. It was just that environment. They were just talking about themselves, essentially."*

The others in attendance had lots of questions for Kav. *"[They were asking me:] 'What's your favourite movie, Tamil movie?' And I was scratching my head. I was like, 'I just watch it with my mum.' 'What's your favourite Tamil music?' I mean, I wasn't really into Tamil music because, obviously, growing up where I did, I guess, like, I was British. like my R&B and my hip hop and my rap. Yeah, that's it. And then when they were asking me, like, so passionate, I was just like, 'Well, I don't really know.' And then, as a result of that, I was just like, 'Fuck, maybe it might be just a bit much [for me here].' It's like I don't fit in."*

As Kav sees it, this sense of not fitting in is a direct result of his growing up in the UK while maintaining links with Sri Lanka, mainly through his parents.

Kav's attempt to connect with people within the Tamil Society was simply an effort to make friends, but the decision to try to make friends with people who share his Tamil heritage specifically is illustrative of a greater desire many people have: to construct their identities by exploring and solidifying their geographical, familial, and cultural roots.

Anu adds: *"[My identity] is not something that I have to remind myself to keep attending to. It's something that I'm always interested in. Like, I don't see myself losing interest in that kind of part of me. And so, because of that, I think I'll always be engaged with different parts of my kind of culture."*

This cultural engagement is always on her terms, but it's inseparable from her connections to her family and their roots, too: *"That doesn't mean that I like to go to watch, like, every Indian movie that comes out, because I just don't. I don't listen to Indian music either. If my mum tells me about an event happening, [I'm like] 'Okay. Yeah. Cool. I'll come along to that.' I wouldn't really want to say no."*

"I don't think [identity is] something that you can forget either", says Fatima. *"You can surround yourself; you can do the most typical British things, but, at the end of the day, based on the colour of your skin, or your family, you will still have that exposure [to something 'else']. So, there's always something. It's equilibrium, it balances itself out."*

For Anu, the importance of history, heritage, and lineage extends to her views of the future, too. She speaks about the importance of preservation; of taking pride in her cultural connections. *"I think if you've been raised with a certain culture, I think it's important to kind of maintain that"*, she explains.

"It's kind of like, if I have kids, I want them to grow up around my mum and my dad just because I want them to understand Punjabi. But it's something quite special and unique to yourself. So why would you let that go, and why would you just become westernised completely? It's all right to have two different cultures, but I think it is quite important to, kind of, embrace the culture that you came from. And your roots."

Kav sees this interplay between differing roots as the defining characteristic of a British Asian identity. *"I grew up here, like knowing bits about my [Tamil] culture, but also just like learning more about British culture. I'm like the first generation of British Asian"*, he tells us. *"I'm the first to have attended university, like this whole experience and stuff like that, which is obviously going to change me, which means that my children are definitely going to be British Asian [too]."*

Perhaps most importantly, his words tell us that nothing to do with identity is fixed. Instead, people's sense of connection with places, people, and heritage shifts continually.

And this includes the term 'British Asian', which is recognised by the members of the Society as imperfect. *"The term, 'British Asian'?"*, muses Kav. *"I didn't really come across it [before coming to uni] because I've just [always] felt just like I was Asian; but only because that's primarily what I tell people if they ask me where I'm from. You get, like, 'Where you from? And then, like, 'Where are you from, from?' If I got [questioned], 'Where are you from?' I was like, 'London'. And sometimes, I did it just for fun; I know what they mean, but I just said, 'London', just to see what's up. And then it's like, 'Okay, no, but like - where are you from, from?' It's like, 'Oh, why am I brown? Well, my parents are from [Sri Lanka].' At first, I was just like, 'This is interesting'. Then I just started having fun with it."*

Anu agrees: *"They're like, 'Where are you from?' I'm like, 'Birmingham.' And they're like, 'Wait, I meant, like where are you from?' And I'm like, 'Well, I wouldn't see myself as, like, from India'; like, my parents are from India."*

Anu and Kav's testimonies illustrate the diversity of experiences of the British Asian Society members growing up around the UK, which have also had an influence on the group's identity.

As well as their relationships with Asia, the society transcends any domestic demographic differences. Kav feels his experiences within the society have opened his eyes to other parts of the country, beyond his London-centric childhood. He describes his experience of learning about people's differing experiences of discrimination around the country as "an awakening".

"Even though they're Asian [too], I would say they definitely had it way more tough than me. In the sense that I grew up in a school where if there was bullying, it'd be more just an interracial point of view. But there's people [I've meet through this] where they're like, 'Yeah, I was the only brown person in my thing.' For example, like [after] a terrorist attack, everyone's just onto you. So, learning about that was quite eye opening."

"I think since coming to uni", explains Anu, *"my views on religions might've changed a bit; but it's quite nice to talk to people who are Sikh and kind of see how they stand. I don't know - kind of like, living at home until sixth-form of high school, or whatever, it's like your parents mould you into what they want you to be, but when you come to uni –I'm sure everyone will kind of experience this – they become their own person. So it's quite nice to speak to other people your age, your kind of ethnicity, who might be having the same kind of awakening. Yeah, so I think this society is the platform maybe to do that."*

Fatima, the club's secretary, grew up in Cleethorpes, near Lincoln. *"It's very white there"*, she says, talking in a cafe area of the Students Union. *"And all the Asian are new families."* Kav, the group's President, experienced something quite different. *"I grew up in East London, so I thought white people were the minority. It must've been maybe 10-15% in my school that was white. So, for me to come from there to Sheffield, it was a complete different switch in energy. I was like, 'Yeah, there's a lot more people [here] that are white, and I'm happy to interact with them.' But at the same time, it's obviously like, I've been so accustomed to just being with so many different people and so many different ethnicities."*

Anu had a childhood that *"was kind of in-between Kav and Fatima. It was a quite diverse area, but it wasn't 'majority [minorities]' or anything like that kind of thing. But then coming here, I think there are just less ethnic people. And that was not shocking in any way, but kind of just a little bit different."*

The group also sees a wide variation in their experiences of home and family-life. Kav's parents moved to the UK during the Sri Lankan Civil War, but he's quick to point out that this type of experience doesn't define the notion of 'British Asian'. *"I've met people whose parents came here in more forgiving circumstances, or they just came here because they wanted to*

study here, and they're a second generation, or third generation immigrant from an immigrant family. And for them, you can see that their families are just part of the community."*

In contrast, given his family history, his parents are quite firmly rooted in traditional Sri Lankan culture, whereas, in his view, *"being more liberal"* towards alcohol, clubbing, sex, and body art *"makes someone more like British Asian".*

Considering distinctions between parents' levels of tolerance, including those shown between first, second and third generation families, Kav points out that, *"It's just the small things that people mention [when talking about their families] and how they interact with their families that tell you [how different things are]."*

Turning to some examples, he tells us, *"I have a friend who was like, 'Oh yes, I like drinking with my dad.' And I was like, 'What?' Because in my family, of course, everyone's pretty cool, they know I drink, but it's just that when I'm at my family events, I'm just like, I'm the little kid [so I don't drink]. Basically. Whereas I've got friends who are like, 'Yeah, we go out with my dad, and I went to a casino one time, we were drinking.' And then they were just, like, bringing girls or guys home and stuff, and that type of thing, and just being more liberal in that sense. I was like, 'Oh, there's a difference there.'"*

Amidst this complexity,
they have opportunities to deal with situations with some degree of agency.

One of the most obvious examples of this cultural minefield comes with experiences of sex education at school, especially when it does not exist in the home (as it didn't within the homes of the members of the British Asian Society introduced here):

"I think I remember the first time I learned about it", recalls Kav, *"And, like I was curious. I was like, 'Okay, I'm being taught about this in school, [maybe I can] bring it up with my mum.' I told her, 'Mum, they told us about sex today,'. And she's like, 'Oh, really? Is it?' And then for her it was like, 'Oh shit, I hope he doesn't ask me anything.' But at the same time, I could see a wave of relief [on her face] that she didn't have to talk to me about this anymore. I don't know how I would feel about my mum [talking to me about that]. So, those are the typical, iconic British situations that I have been a part of]."*

Of course, the issues of sex and sex education are notoriously tricky for many young people to navigate. But there is something especially tricky about an experience of bridging two different spheres of acceptance and expectation. While having the pressure to present themselves to the 'wider world' and their families in different ways, the existence of the British Asian Society is an opportunity for them to behave and connect with others as themselves; living an unfiltered life free from the burden of existential tension.

The British Asian Society prides itself on
# the open and inclusive nature of the society.

Amara, who founded the Society but is currently not at the university, is proud of its record: "This year, they've got Turkish, they've got Sri Lankan, they've got Pakistanis, they've got Indians. It's very diverse this year, the committee, which we were really hoping that it would be."

Given such foundations, everyone in the group is acutely aware of sensitivities surrounding ethnic, racial and cultural differences and similarities. Acknowledging this heightened awareness, the British Asian Society aims to be as inclusive and accepting as possible, encouraging all British Asians (including those with Indian, Chinese, Pakistani, Malaysian, Sri Lankan, and Turkish heritages, among others), international students from across the Asian continent, and anyone else (regardless of any Asian links) to come to their events.

They also have a wide variety of events in which people of any faith can take part. For example, some events cater to people who drink alcohol and others are designed so that alcohol is not a central or integral part of proceedings.

"So we can cater for everyone," Arjun explains, "and you come to the ones that suit you the best, basically." Like all other societies at the University, the committee includes an Inclusion Officer, who considers gendered, sexual and racial forms of discrimination.

However, inclusion is inherent in the community. Amara explains why: "In this day and age, where people are very divided about culture and religion, I think we just wanted everyone to feel safe in a space. Otherwise, people are stigmatised for being Asian in this society, sometimes, and often subject to racial harassment, and things like that. We didn't want to make a society that would do that, obviously, because that's not what we were about. We wanted to make a society where no matter who you are, you feel safe and you can just be yourself, because it's really important that we have a society where people feel safe and can celebrate what makes them. Our aim is to be really inclusive and not limited to just people who identify as British-Asian, but also to celebrate everything that is good about it and have people enjoy that."
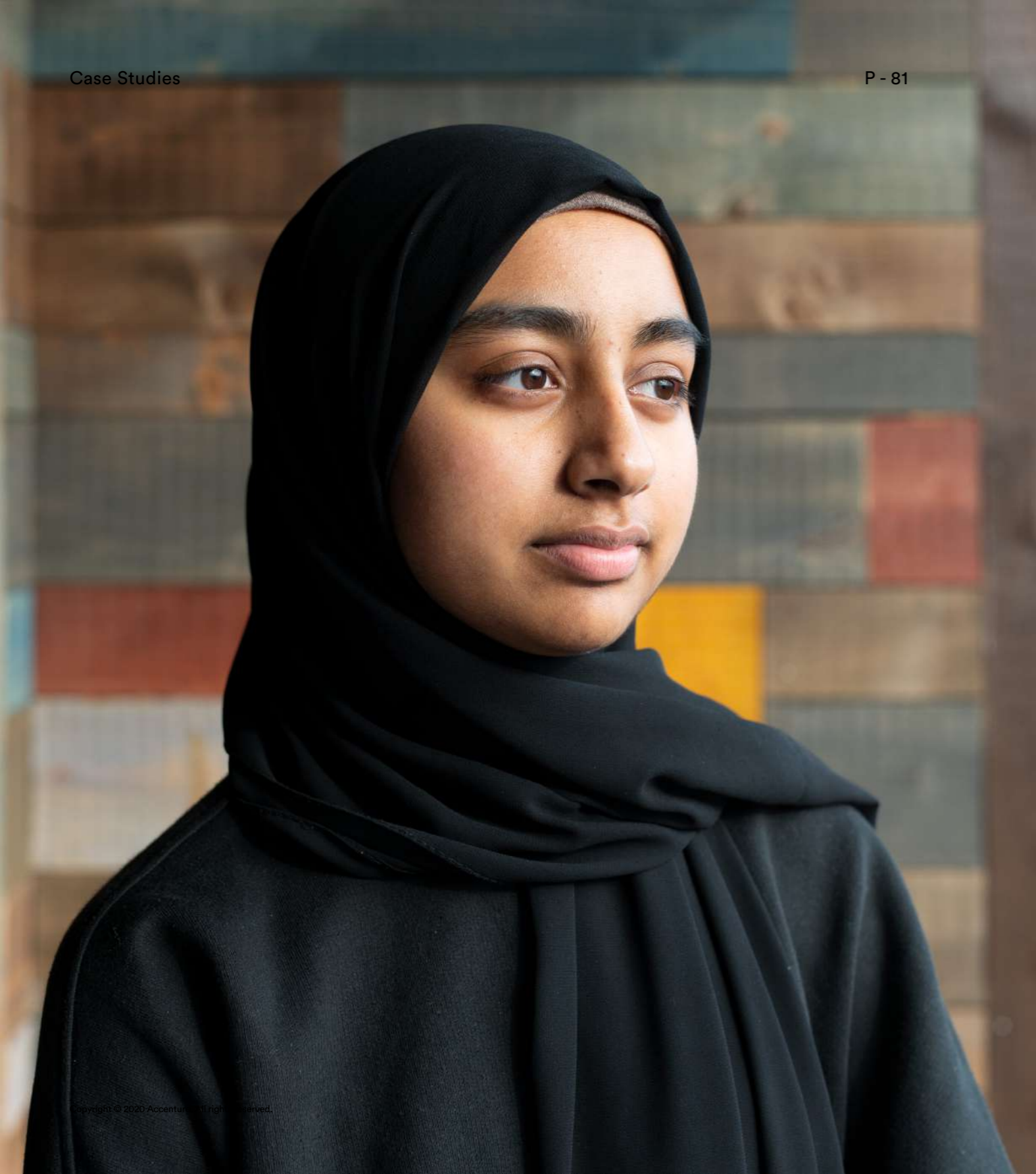
To some extent, the intensity of this ambition was driven by their experiences of other societies, most especially those dedicated to specific countries where they didn't feel quite so comfortable. *"[The Indian or Pakistani societies] would be very welcoming,"* Arjan explains. *"Obviously, they'll invite you and stuff. But then when you actually have to try to break into that kind of friendship circle, and it's more difficult for someone like me because I didn't really have a lot in common with those people. So, it's not like it's unwelcoming, like they'd obviously have to speak to me and stuff, they don't want to make me feel secluded explicitly, but I sort of feel out of place there. Whereas, in Brit Asian society, everyone has similar interests, mindsets, because we grew up in the UK, and stuff; so it's a lot more welcoming here."*

Taking on this idea, Anu speaks about cultural differences: *"The culture gap [between me and the people who join country-specific societies] is quite huge. And for me personally, I felt like I'd be judged for being me. The first time I went, I felt like I was being judged. I feel like they don't maybe drink as much as I do. And I feel like I dress differently to them. And I feel like I couldn't really be myself around them. It's quite generic [I know], but just from that one experience, that's how I felt."*

With universities being key places for self-discovery, the British Asian society aims to provide spaces for conversation and exploration of culture, identity, and religion, among other things.

Importantly, nobody in the group thinks there is only one British Asian experience or identity that is shared by everyone. Rather, members feel the term is the best way of encapsulating a vast array of important similarities and shared experiences.

"Because, even in our society," says Kav, *"there are some people that speak their native language well, but, at the same time, where they've grown up [influences their experiences, too]. I do appreciate having friends [who were British Asian at school]; just chilling with them - how it was in secondary school. Some [other] people are talking about [Asian] music, and maybe it's all familiar to them [but it's not to me]. I mean, there's enough space for everyone [in the Society]."*

This inclusive nature is apparent in the British Asian Society's collaborations with other societies, such as a laser quest event with the Filipino society or a hookah night with the Arab society.

These collaborations allow the committee to spread the word about the British Asian Society, helping them to get noticed around the campus and welcome more people into the fold.

As Kav puts it, *"[We do collaborations] mainly to get people to care about us. I've always been asking people at the collaborations, 'Oh, have you heard of Brit Asian before?' And usually they'll say, 'No', but that's okay because we've just formed. The main thing is that they'd know about us afterwards and they can maybe tell their friends and then they'll come to our events too."*

This philosophy underpins their policy of making their events open to everyone.

On the flipside, he's using these experiences to overcome the instinct for any ignorance or intolerance he might have: *"There's people who are much more British Asian than me; where all their friends are white*

and they're going on lads' tours and stuff like that. I'm just like, 'Yeah, man, go for it. Enjoy yourself. Live your best life.'"

When discussing the fact that British Asian experiences weren't acknowledged within the university at the beginning of 2018, they were motivated to create an environment in which people could come together to share and explore all things British and Asian, regardless their own ethnicity or national identity.

In this spirit, the society is not exclusive to British Asians, it is a network of events and people who want to make new friends and understand more about each other's lives.

There is hope in Sheffield that the friendships built within the British Asian Society can ensure more enjoyable university experiences for people who might otherwise find it harder to establish themselves socially:

"Uni can easily become a very isolated place", explains Talal. *"For me personally, I would say that it was very easy to be like, 'Where do I fit in? Who am I?'."* *"Especially in your first year when you start"*, agrees Kav. *"It gets quite bad. I didn't even know anyone then. I didn't even know much about the uni. When I came here, I was just like, 'Well, where are my people?' In the sense of people like me and my friends [at home]. But, [at the beginning, I was asking myself], 'Where can I find that?' And if you don't, it's just hard. And you think it's just going to be like this [for your whole time at university]."*

The British Asian Society provides opportunities for people in every year of their degree to establish friendships that extend beyond the confines of individual events:

"Like they'll go to the cinema; having a bit of fun", Kav explains. *"[They'll be thinking], 'We're watching something together, we're doing something together'."*

Kav recognises the importance of informal social interaction and is hopeful that people will continue to *"turn up to events and actually have fun."* *"I feel like that's a success in itself"*.

Anu agrees, *"because we're doing something right if they're returning with their friends and making new friends."*

When people ask about the next event or thank them for how much they enjoyed a previous one, the committee can see the positive outcomes of their efforts.

For Amara, these everyday interactions are the most fulfilling and important aspects of the Society, and something she hopes can continue:

"We established it as a place where all British-Asian people can connect. For me, when I looked at a bunch of people I'd never met before – they were all together in this one room, having fun, all chatting, and socialising. I was able to say, 'I was part of that. I effectively managed to get all these people into a room together'. This probably never would have happened before and had never happened at the uni. Seeing your things come to life is the most fulfilling [thing]; seeing that I can do this. It's great to see that other people have made friends through this. Maybe I've left behind something positive. I hope that's still going [today, now I've left]: a place where I feel like I fit in. Because I just didn't feel like I had a society where I truly felt at home until we founded this one."

As well as expanding the society Anu also hopes to increase knowledge and understanding of their shared identity:

"Other people go to, like sports societies and other kind of interests", explains Anu, the longest-standing member of the committee, *"but this is something where you don't have to have a skill; whereas for a sport or art society you kind of do need to have like a skill. This is just something like purely social."*

Under the surface of this ambition to create opportunities for people to socialise, the Society has other wide-reaching hopes. The people meeting each other might have family ties to different parts of Asia, have gone to school in different areas of the country, or have no previous connections to Asia at all, but brought together under the umbrella of the British Asian Society, these distinctions often fall away.

For Kav, this dynamic is a positive example of how social contact can dispel preconceptions, even those deep-set enough to engender racism and xenophobia. Society members openly talk about racist incidents they've encountered, which "happen every now and then", according to Salou, and are "something you maybe can't avoid."

For them, the most hurtful experiences come when someone else of colour highlights a difference in skin tone; *"essentially being singled out because you have darker skin"*, explains Kav. *"We're one in the same in the sense that we're from different countries and yet somehow [they've] found a way to discriminate me based on the fact that I'm darker than [them]"*.

Kav's hopeful that the British Asian Society can help stunt the ignorance and intolerance that exists in wider society.

In Sheffield, he's experienced *"microaggressions; I feel like out of ignorance."* But *"people don't hate on an individual basis, they hate on ideas"*, he explains. *"So, if you think of the idea that an immigrant will come and steal your job, it's easy to hate them. And that gives me hope for the future, because I feel as though with increased integration and just having spaces for people to interact and explore, they'll understand that it just opens the mind up. Ignorance has a big part to play. Some people just haven't been exposed [to other people] and due to their lack of knowledge,*

they just [believe] whatever they hear first, from their friend or whatever they might be exposed to. But then, after having spoken to someone, you might be like, 'Hey, you know what, it's interesting, it's cool.'"

For Kav, communities being able to think in terms of specific ideas rather than broad-brushstroke racial division is the way to have a positive impact.

By extending their reach – attracting new, more diverse members, and holding more events – the group is also hopeful of extending opportunities for increased understanding to a wider portion of the university's student body:

"Just trying to get as many people to know about it, to hear about our society, to try and join as well", as Kav puts it. As it continues to grow, so does the chances of it making a wider-reaching impact.

Because of the expectations and conventions established in this new community, the British Asian Society feel they're doing something quite different. *"I feel like I don't really get judged for being me as much"*, Anu says.

Analysis

It's worth noting that while factors such as geographical proximity and shared identity, hobbies or professions can influence the formation of social units, they insufficiently explain what brings these groups together, keeps them together, and drives them to thrive and expand.

All of the groups formed organically and independently of larger umbrella organisations

Like businesses or religious communities. The possible exception to this claim is the British Asian Society, whose founding members were all students at Sheffield University, however, the fact of being students at the same institution wasn't the sole driver. Their struggle to register their Society with the Student Union also belies the idea that the university played a central role in the formation of the community, unlike other university institutions.

The Welsh Warriors, Wonderful Wild Women and Lockdown Collective can all to an extent be defined as interest – or leisure – based communities, but we aim here to reveal commonalities in the forces which drive the members of each to form such strong connections around such niches, which transcend the 'interests'

themselves and are therefore more instructive in defining the nature of the communities than simply attributing the successes of these units to a shared passion.

While geography is undoubtedly a factor in these communities' origins, describing these groups as local or proximity-based 'neighbourhood' communities doesn't tell the whole story as evidenced by such examples as Helen from Opening Doors' sense of isolation from her neighbours.

Instead, niche common interests and demographic identities play a much stronger role. The fact that these communities cannot be defined simply by geography is exemplified by their expansion beyond their local 'neighbourhoods', particularly aided by social media and online communication.

The Welsh Warriors, for example, have become part of the international arm-wrestling community; The Wonderful Wild Women are united with other outdoor activities enthusiasts from around the UK; and Opening Doors have ambitions of serving the whole of Britain rather than London only.

Identity 'projection' and shared morality are the most complex factors which define traditional communities. Different elements of these factors apply to different the communities selected here. Identity is fundamental to the existence of Opening Doors and the British Asian Society, and, while not an outright barrier, identifying as a woman is a common thread for members of the Wonderful Wild Women.

Even when the foundation of these communities is based on identity, their growth and evolution tend to be shaped by concerns for openness and diversity. This is a marked contrast to the exclusive tendencies of certain communities such as fundamentalist religious groups or extreme political movements. Men

are free to join the Wonderful Wild Women, students from any ethnic background can join the British Asian Society, and young people and heterosexuals can volunteer for Opening Doors. This demonstrates that the role of identity in these communities is distinct from its role in traditional communities.

Diversity and openness form part of the moral philosophy of each community, generally geared towards making a positive social impact on wider society and the wellbeing of its members. This can be seen in the work Lockdown Collective does to empower young artists, inspire school kids or help promote local businesses; In the Wonderful Wild Women's picking up litter, tending to the environmental wellbeing of their local beauty spots or mutually supporting each other's mental health; and Opening Doors' befriending service that combats loneliness and isolation, and members' intersectional campaigning for wider acceptance of LGBT+ people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

These communities belie notions of a society divided into antagonistic tribes by ideological and political polarisation. On the contrary, they appear as an antidote to division.

None are indicative of a society where social media is stunting physical social interaction and contributing to a loneliness epidemic. Instead, social media emerges as a positive driver towards organising physical/in-person social interactions and friendships for almost every community.

Despite having a material impact on all of the groups' physical activities in the short term – having hit Opening Doors members and beneficiaries particularly hard – even

the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have strengthened these groups by solidifying their identities, putting them in touch with new audiences, underlining their importance to members, and giving members new creative and therapeutic outlets.

To understand which other societal forces and cultural trends are bringing people together in 2020, it is important to look at other threads running strongly through each of these groups.

What's bringing people together?

What's bringing people together?

Identity as a force for Unity:
Diversity, Inclusion, and the New Impact of Identity

Identity is a complex concept which can cause division when support for one identity is seen to conflict with the wellbeing of those associated with another. For example, the antiracism 'Black Lives Matter' movement spawned the white exceptionalism (many would say racist[31]) response 'All Lives Matter' and 'White Lives Matter'. Similarly, the argument over gender self-identity sees 'TERFs' and 'TRAs' trade constant, brutal blows on social media, as do 'Remainers' and 'Brexiteers'. Those who might otherwise form constructive relationships together – neighbours, colleagues, friends – alienate themselves from each other.

But the communities studied here paint an altogether different picture of identity, one which draws upon openness, acceptance and inclusivity.

The people at the heart of each group, whether actively or implicitly, have formed new collective identities while drawing upon this group identity to shape their individual identities. These collective and individual identities transcend the demographics and politics that can divide people and foster a sense of agency and empowerment among these groups and their members.

Even when demographics are a factor in establishing the group and individual identities of these communities, as with the British Asian Society and Opening Doors, the membership dynamics of every one of these social units – and the means by which they recruit or welcome new members - crosses potential racial, class, political, religious, gender and sexuality divides.

All five communities give members access to a unique, new form of identity – both collective and individual- constructed with inclusivity, openness, diversity, and tolerance at their core.

The Welsh Warriors, for example, come from all walks of life ranging from lawyers to farmers to jobseekers

But are connected by a hunger for high performance sport. They share a sense of Welshness but talk enthusiastically about recruiting Bulgarian and Polish members and meeting people of other nationalities through international competition. They take pride in how, for Danny, the Bulgarian member of the group, arm wrestling acts as a cultural bridge helping him overcome tough beginnings to living in a new area. David also talks enthusiastically about how the technical specifics of arm-wrestling allow people of any age to join, crossing a boundary that makes certain other sports age-exclusive.

Members of the Wonderful Wild Women are all ages, backgrounds, abilities and interests, and welcome men to the group.

It's their thirst for adventure and search for personal challenges that unite them. They also cater for those seeking an open-ended range of leisure pursuits.

The importance of this identity is underlined by the opinion, expressed by multiple interviewees, that women are not always encouraged to take up outdoor pursuits and therefore that such a community is necessary to empower them to do so. By being members of the Wonderful Wild Women, they are not simply adopting a community identity, but seizing a sense of agency they felt was previously lacking.

The role of the outdoors in this identity takes on extra significance when Sarah refers to it as 'levelling the playing field', going on to explain that the shared sense of enjoyment members get from being outdoors overrides other aspects of their values or identity which might otherwise cause disagreement. In other words, the outdoor setting itself acts as a bridge between people, as does the identity the Wonderful Wild Women have formed around it.

Lockdown Collective share the regional identity of being from Hull, although this appears chiefly to inform their artistic personality.

See (Chiedu rapping in his Yorkshire accent, for example) rather than create any tribal or territorial barriers to entry for those interested in the community. The group's members make a point of crossing demographic lines, such as the age divide that they traverse via their youth work. Judging by their descriptions of the diverse social groups which form their fanbase, and what Deezkid calls the 'no judgement vibe' of their gigs, they are focussed on a shared love of hip-hop and Grime first and foremost. Their identity as 'Hull's Grime Scene' transcends any other characteristic.

Opening Doors are identity-based in the sense that 'elderly LGBT+' describes a specific section of society, demographically speaking.

But its members' friendships transcend differences like social class (in the case of Helen and Jane) and race – as evidenced by Helen and Jane's discussion of intersectionality and strong feelings of solidarity with LGBT+ people of colour. The true role identity plays for Opening Doors is to help transform elderly LGBT+ from a slot on a Venn diagram into an identity in and of itself, that people can advocate and campaign for.

Being grouped with a larger demographic is not necessarily anathema to forming a new identity, and, as well as increasing visibility of the specific older LGBT+ demographic, membership of Opening Doors is seen by its members as an organised part of a wider ongoing struggle for LGBT+ equality. Jane summarises the limited progress made on that journey and need for continued activism by saying: *"We don't want tolerance. Acceptance is better."*

Sheffield University's British Asian Society are also an identity-based organisation, but by adopting an 'everyone is welcome'

approach they have pre-empted any potential divides between different nationalities, ethnicities, and religions, and between first and second-generation migrants. Amara's account of having a stronger connection as a British Pakistani to British Indians than to international Pakistani students suggests that the British Asian identity has a stronger pull than any single national identity, for those from this multinational background.

Members of the group do not discriminate along class, sexuality, or political lines either, a stance that is backed up by their inclusivity officer, and they're careful to ensure that other social characteristics, such as whether someone drinks alcohol or not, are catered to inclusively.

Importantly, the existence of the British Asian Society gives its members a sense of agency and solidifies their existence as a collective. Much like Opening Doors, members of the society believe that fleshing out a cultural identity for British Asians, and increasing awareness and understanding of the identity, will also increase acceptance. Again, similarly to Opening Doors, the British Asian Society is seen as something of a safe space for its members to unashamedly embrace their identity without fear of judgement, discrimination or lack of understanding.

These new identities appear largely unaffected by the COVID-19 crisis, and in some cases the adversity has caused some members of these communities to cling harder to their identities in a way which has galvanised them.

Consider for instance the lengths to which the Welsh Warriors have gone to maintain a training regime and conversations that are specific to arm wrestling despite not being able to arm wrestle (outside their homes), just as the Wonderful Wild Women have sought to maintain their activities through projects like the Virual Run Club.

Equally, Lockdown Collective's identity has strengthened during COVID-19, through both the reinforcement of ties within the group – particularly through their Sound Clashes- and their efforts to project the community to wider audiences.

Lockdown Collective's activity has much in common with the archetype of 'Projected' or 'Imagined' communities; those for whom communication of their identity (or values) is stronger than any physical or organisational bond.[32] During the COVID-19 crisis, when communities are unable to convene, this concept of projecting an

identity has taken on new significance, not just for Lockdown Collective, but also for the Welsh Warriors, who do so as part of the wider arm wrestling community.

While these measures are largely proactive and positive, the identity of Opening Doors members - the elderly LGBT+ community- has strengthened reactively and through necessity.

Sadly, the pandemic has highlighted how acutely certain issues, such as lack of access to digital communications, impact this community.

However Opening Doors' response to COVID-19 has only served to strengthened Its community: They have benefitted from a wider upsurge in volunteering, with 160 new volunteers and a waiting list of 60, and a new need to build online systems to operate during COVID-19 has allowed Opening Doors to take steps towards expanding beyond London and to welcome members nationwide.

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What's bringing people together?

Mental & Physical Wellbeing
is vital to these groups

One of the ways in which our society is developing rapidly is the explosion of awareness of mental and physical health, and interest in wellness and wellbeing[33].

Though often dismissed as corporate opportunism[34] or a millennial fad[35], there is evidence in the communities considered here that, not only are these practices saturating indelibly into our society, but they are actually a catalyst for the formation of new communities, as well as the reason for many of the individuals to join them.

The role of wellness in the formation of the Welsh Warriors is twofold.

Firstly, arm-wrestling is a high-performance sport which members can do locally and fit around their careers and home lives. David says he puts *"everything into it"* and this high level of dedication is demonstrated in the Welsh Warriors' gruelling training schedule. This drive for excellence shows that the sport is a form of self-improvement beyond a mere hobby. Moreover, self-improvement – as well as physical activity - is considered more widely to be beneficial to mental and physical wellbeing.[36]

David makes this theory explicit when discussing the therapeutic benefits of being a member of the community – citing both the practice of dedicating oneself to the sport and the social unit which has formed around it, whose function he simply describes as *"we look after each other"*. In these ways he credits arm-wrestling, both as a practice and as membership of a social unit, with helping members of the Welsh Warriors manage stress and mental health issues, as well as work through traumatic experiences such as divorce and addiction.

The intersection of physical and mental wellbeing is also a key driver in the growth and success of the Wonderful Wild Women.

Like Welsh Warriors, this centres around a physical activity (or a range of physical activities), but the Wild Women are different in the sense that for its members, it's the taking part that counts. In this case, the self-improvement focus is less on high-performance excellence and more on trying something new – widening the horizons of the group's members.

As such, the therapeutic benefits of the Wonderful Wild Women, while similar in their impact on members' wellness to those of the arm wrestlers, take a different shape.

The Wild Women report an almost spiritual connection with nature, referred to by Gilly as "quite magical".

On a physical level, they report that the sense of adventure gained from outdoor pursuits has an invigorating effect that supplements the aforementioned, standalone benefits of physical activity. This belief is particularly evident in Gilly's account of swimming in progressively colder water throughout the changing seasons and the *"empowering"* feeling of getting in. The *"positive effect [outdoor activities] can have generally on your wider life"* is set out as part of the group's overall ethos.

Wellbeing was fundamental to the creation of the Wonderful Wild Women, with Sarah describing her motivation as a search for positivity and for something *"to help me feel better"* when her overall health was in a precarious state.

The wellbeing benefits offered by this community also function on a psychological level. The outdoors acts as an escape from the stresses of everyday home and work life, and feels like a sanctuary, or a safe space in which they can openly share problems, advice and empathy with their fellow members. Members evidence how this practice is beneficial to their mental health – with Julia describing running as her "therapy" and Vicky citing wild swimming with the community as the only thing she was motivated to do and kept her going during a period of poor mental health.

Beyond this practical outlet, the Wonderful Wild Women also talk in near-spiritual terms about their connection with the outdoors, **and how this contact with the immensity of nature gives them new perspectives and a sense of what is important on life, and how this similarly has mental health benefits.**

The therapeutic value of creative pursuits, and particularly music[37] is well documented. In making music, and exposing and inspiring young people and upcoming artists, through their school visits and collaborations, Lockdown Collective are seeking to improve the wellbeing of their wider community. Like the dedication shown by the Welsh Warriors, this approach demonstrates that self-improvement is a key element of in the way the community functions.

As well as benefitting the wellbeing of others, Lockdown Collective's model also has a positive effect on the wellness of its founders, in much the same way as Sarah and Gilly of the Wonderful Wild Women. Volunteering is well-documented to have mental health benefits[38] and Lockdown Collective's founders' reports of their outreach work include accounts of energising and invigorating effects on their own lives.

The mental wellbeing of its members is crucial to Opening Doors. While the wellness benefits of the other communities cater to those with mental health issues without explicitly targeting such issues, Opening Doors and its befriending service and events in particular, are explicitly targeted towards those struck by the 'loneliness epidemic' often said to be affecting modern society. Loneliness has a proven negative impact on mental health,[39] to which Opening Doors members testify, and older LGBT+ people are disproportionately likely to suffer. By providing company for members of this social group, Opening Doors offers obvious but essential and transformative benefits to the wellbeing of its members. Jane and Helen's friendship has made them both more outgoing and led them to feel more at ease in their home lives, while Opening Doors coffee mornings are described as a "touchstone" and "a joyous environment" by Michael, illustrating their positive impact.

The catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 crisis and social distancing on Opening Doors' activities, and the knock-on effect these events have had on the wellbeing of its members, demonstrates how central wellbeing is to the organisation. The reports of members suffering drastically due to either lack of usual care, lack of access to the internet or digital communications, or isolation due to lack of communication are striking – with one member reported as saying that the impact of lockdown and related isolation was worse than the risk of catching the virus.

Of all the communities studied for this report, The British Asian society is least driven by its members' wellness, **but the community is constructed to offer important benefits to the mental and spiritual wellbeing of its members.**

In this sense, its aims are similar to those of Opening Doors. The British Asian Society partly exists to combat the potentially harmful impact of loneliness and isolation, both prevalent in university environments, as well as to cope with members' anxieties around their hybrid identities.

Salou and Kav talk about how the society has become an open forum and source of mutual support for members who have experienced incidents of racism, which again signals an inherent concern for the wellbeing of its members. This dynamic functions in a similar fashion to the Wonderful Wild Women's system of mutual support, or to a lesser extent the Welsh Warriors' social outlets, but by providing sanctuaries in which to discuss such damaging experiences the wellbeing of its members takes on extra significance for the British Asian Society.

Wellness, and particularly mental health, is often treated as an individual journey, but the pursuit of better wellbeing is ingrained in the collective consciousness of each of the communities examined here. This observation demonstrates how people's growing awareness of, and concern for both physical and mental health is now informing the

development of new communities. Opening Doors was fundamentally set-up to improve the mental wellbeing of its members, while both Welsh Warriors and Wonderful Wild Women were set up with physical health and socialising in mind (notwithstanding the consensus that good physical health and good mental health are linked), both have developed into a crucial driver of better wellbeing for their members.

The power of these communities to have a positive impact on the wellbeing and wellness of their members through self-improvement and mutual support has largely stood the test of the COVID-19 pandemic, and arguably been strengthened. The exception to this is Opening Doors, whose services have been severely hampered by lockdown and social distancing, but whose crucial role in the wellness of their members has been strongly underlined by the crisis.

As with the impact of the pandemic on their identities, the buttressing of these communities' credentials as promoters of wellness has come about partly as a reaction to the adversity caused by the crisis, but also, in certain communities, as a result of practical and proactive measures to keep functioning during lockdown.

Deprived of competition and social contact, the Welsh Warriors gave their members training resources, mutual inspiration, and entertaining and informative online content to keep them connected with the world of arm wrestling.

Similarly, the Wonderful Wild Women recounted benefits which derive from the dynamic of having a group adventure and the mutual support and friendship offered by this camaraderie. They have been able to replicate this to an extent during lockdown through their Virtual Run Club initiative, which has offered both a social outlet and a safe space to talk about the personal issues and problems that have arisen as a result of COVID-19.

Lockdown Collective are also a useful example of the way that COVID-19 has shifted perspectives and become an opportunity to reflect on what to be thankful for and what to change about our lives pre-pandemic, with Lockdown Collective talking about their determination not to take their freedom for granted by living a 'fearless' existence post lockdown.

Similarly Welsh Arm Wrestler David Bradford reports a renewed commitment to focussing on the positives in his life, and Sarah from Wonderful Wild Women talks about her new awareness of her privilege: the renewed appreciation of the access she has to the outdoors on her doorstep, but also a new appreciation of nature as a whole and a new energy to protect it. This 'stop and smell the roses' approach is often cited as being beneficial to wellbeing and mental health.[40]

Opening Doors have the most direct responsibility of any of the communities in this study for the wellbeing of their members, and as a result the importance of wellness in community building is best illustrated through their struggles during COVID-19. Social distancing, shielding and quarantine have prevented volunteers from having physical access to members, and members from meeting each other; both of which, in offering members practical assistance with everyday tasks, and offering them crucial social interaction, were utterly vital to Opening Doors' role in the wellbeing of their community.

Shorn of the ability to provide these services, the wellbeing and wellness of Opening Doors' members – already some of the most vulnerable people in society- has suffered almost across the board. Such is the role of some new communities in the wellness of their members, that when one of them is hamstrung as Opening Doors have been by COVID-19, everyone in the community suffers materially.

What's bringing people together?

Positive Social Impact

Helping Others is part
of community life

Social Impact is an umbrella term for community outreach, charity work or engagements with a particular social issue, designed to describe activity that produces practical benefits to wider society.[41]

Its popularity has skyrocketed, especially in the world of major corporate brands, to the extent that some have been accused of virtue signalling or 'clicktivism'[42] in an attempt to improve a public image.[43]

But this feeling that a community must benefit other communities and wider society around it is also ingrained in each of the communities this project focusses on, suggesting that Social Impact (for want of a better term), or at the very least a general concern with improving the wellbeing of others outside of an immediate group, is impacting community life at its grassroots, as well as in boardrooms and on billboards.

The Welsh Warriors' desire to contribute to wider society is focussed on advocacy; they present themselves as positive representations of the places they are from (both Pontypool and Wales). Certainly, the community's existence and ethos of openness has the social impact of giving people a chance to take part in a high-performance sport, or at least leisure activity in an area where opportunities to do so are limited. But David's patriotism and pride in his town also drive his determination for the Welsh Warriors to project a positive representation of the area. Perhaps the biggest social impact of the community is the existence of them as role models; living examples of the potential David sees in Pontypool. Similarly, the organisation strives to put Welsh arm-wrestling *"on the map"*, boosting the area's reputation through international competition and relationships.

The Wonderful Wild Women's positive social impact is driven partly by a collective connection with nature that is inspired by the group's activities. This connection has evolved into a local conservation effort and a wider interest in environmentalism. Having derived personal and collective benefits from their abilities to enjoy the natural world, the group's members became motivated to assist in its preservation; describing themselves as *"custodians of the landscape"* and citing the importance of picking up litter during the summer.

When charting the evolution of the community, Sarah talks about how its central purpose became to *"inspire more women to get outdoors"*. This ambition diverges from the ideas of inclusivity and openness discussed in the 'Identity' analysis, and the desire to spread positivity within the community discussed in the 'Wellness' section, as it seeks to inspire as many women as possible to get involved in outdoor activity; as an outward-facing mantra that extends beyond the bounds of the physical community.

There is also a practical element to the Wonderful Wild Women's social impact, outlined here by Sarah, which shows a general concern with having a positive effect on society around them:

"We collaborate with local guides and businesses to help promote them, but also to help give an opportunity for people to engage with those companies".

Lockdown Collective's impact on wider society is
the most multifarious of the communities considered here.

On one hand, their tours of schools provide both entertainment and inspiration for local children (near-unique inspiration too, as one of the few grime collectives in the region). Chiedu is explicit in his desire to inspire others to be musicians and rise above what he describes as Hull's *'defeatist attitude'*. He's ambitious about helping to fulfil what he sees as the *'potential'* of the city's people.

And this attitude doesn't necessarily mean inspiring others into careers as musicians, but, rather, using music to gain focus. As Chiedu puts it:

"We're just trying to show people that, through music, you can get to where you want to be."

The example of using a festival headline slot to provide a platform to least one young artist on every song shows that the dedication to "send the ladder back down" is prized beyond any personal ambitions. As Chiedu puts it: "it's about feeding the next generation".

Finally, in their efforts to promote local businesses, such as Poorboy Boutique and Yankee Land, Lockdown are using their own platforms (especially the one they've developed online) for the benefit of their neighbouring communities; in a similar manner to how the Wonderful Wild Women collaborate with local businesses. Perhaps influenced by Deezkid's time as a youth centre volunteer and Chiedu's time working in alternative education, every element of the Lockdown Collective's organisation and output is configured to deliver a benefit to those beyond its core members. Whether it's offering advice and hope to school children, platforming upcoming artists, or diverting publicity to those in their local community, each element aims to make a positive and measurable impact on society.

In one sense, Opening Doors' impact on its wider community is linked to how it supports its members' wellness and mental health: it provides vital services for a vulnerable group. However, its social impact goes further, and, like the Welsh Warriors, is centred on advocacy (although this advocacy arguably goes further than that of the arm wrestlers in forming part of a wider battle against discrimination and for equality).

Part of Opening Doors' mission statement is to raise awareness of elderly LGBT+ people as a group and draw attention to the support they require, and ways people can help to provide it. This activism is intersectional in that it most directly targets one group but also addresses issues facing elderly people more generally and the wider LGBT+ community.

The group's societal impact is not inward-facing only. Its members talk in strong terms about the struggle for acceptance undergone by LGBT+ people on a daily basis, and see their membership of the Opening Doors community as part of a wider drive for all LGBT+ people to gain true equality. Just as it informs their members' collective identity, this activism forms part of the charity's wider social impact.

The emphasis Helen and Jane put on the extra challenges faced by LGBT+ people of colour show that within the Opening Doors community there is an appetite to make sure that the vital impact the charity makes on the lives of its own members is felt by as many people as possible.

Like Opening Doors, the British Asian Society's social impact is linked to their identity, in that its very existence gives a name and a voice to a group of people who might otherwise be marginalised, and even extends to people who are not direct members of the community who might benefit from this greater visibility.

The groups' social impact is also linked to their positive impact on members, particularly as the strengthening and promotion of the British Asian-identity gives a wider group of people a sense of belonging and agency, as well as a social unit with which they can connect.

With understanding and visibility comes greater acceptance. Both Opening Doors and the British Asian Society are benefitting their future counterparts and wider society by increasing awareness of the people they represent and the issues they face.

These desires for a community's existence to benefit wider society appear to have strengthened during the pandemic. Separately from its academic definition, 'Community Spirit' is often used as a term to describe the general sense of camaraderie that emerges when 'backs-are-against-the-wall', such as the feelings of essential services workers and volunteers throughout the COVID-19 crisis.[44] The communities at the heart of this project offer concrete examples of the existence of this camaraderie too.

iv

What's bringing people together?

Communities are using
Social Media as a tool for Unity

On the surface, social media is no different to other forms of technology that allow users to facilitate aspects of their own lives. **However, it is no surprise that Big Tech companies have corporate aims of their own, which could conflict with the existing ambitions of their users. For instance, social media companies engineer their platforms so that people spend as much time on them as possible.**

A 2017 study found that spending excessive time on social media can intensify or even create feelings of isolation.[45]

Such studies have strengthened the notion of 'antisocial media'[46][47] and claims that our common use of social media platforms alienates, divides[48] and sometimes leeches humanity from our communications.[49]

Even when the medium brings people together, social media communities can pivot towards tribalised, ideological zeal; a kind of exchange that's more likely to sew antagonism than unity.[50]

However, beyond the most high profile uses of social media that are perceived to have a negative impact on society – fake news, abuse, trolling, doxing, pile-ons and cancel culture[51] - its utility most simply lies in the ability to share information, an essential tool in the building of each of the communities presented in this report. In short, the groups at the heart of this report are using social media for good, and therefore experience and evaluate it positively.

The Welsh Warriors used social media to establish their society before it acted as a platform to strike-up and sustain conversations between members, becoming a key catalyst in the group becoming a community. In other words, without social media, the Welsh Warriors may not have evolved beyond a collective whose only interaction with each other was training and tournaments, into a tight-knit social unit which David describes as *"in constant contact with each other, via messenger groups, and things like that"*.

Similarly, social media has been an key tool in helping the group expand its influence, as evidenced by David's account of the friendships he has made around the world and his example of the connections he made with arm wrestlers in Vietnam.

The Wonderful Wild Women have a more complex relationship with social media having formed on Instagram – where the community now enjoys a significant following- before growing via Facebook Groups. As a communication and organisational tool, it's undeniable that social media has allowed the Wonderful Wild Women to grow more than it would be able to through word of mouth alone, especially when considering that its membership is spread throughout the sparsely populated Lake District and beyond.

Social media continues to play a huge part in the group's communications too, despite concerns from members of the group over the perceived inauthenticity of those who *"don't necessarily walk a good walk"* on platforms like Instagram.

Rather than drive them away from social media, this dynamic has merely served to inform the ways the Wonderful Wild Women use these platforms, with their captions and photos representing what they believe are more honest accounts of women partaking in outdoor pursuits. The fact that this ethos has seen their audience grow continually, signals that they have a creative relationship with social media that will continue to be an integral component in the functioning of the community.

Lockdown Collective's relationship with digital communications pre-dates the term 'social media', with the original musical collective forming on MSN and strengthening through the DIY music production community.

In the UK, this community has become a steadfast feature of the evolution of social media, which is now the prime platform for artists to share their music, build their following, and give fans insights into their personality. When Chiedu and Deezkid did come together it was via Facebook.

Despite social media being so woven into the fabric of the group's creation and existence, Lockdown Collective feel the COVID-19 lockdown has exposed flaws in their ability to use these platforms, and they've resolved to increase and improve the quality of their content output. The role of social media in the future of Lockdown Collective and in shaping the community's personality and identity, looks set to grow.

In some ways, Opening Doors is an illustrative use case on the importance of social media in the formation of communities because of the issues caused by its members' relative lack of connectivity via social media and the internet. Lack of internet access or knowledge is often cited as contributor to the isolation or loneliness of its members.

Opening Doors' digital presence has increased exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with members downloading Zoom and exploring various other means of digital communication. The charity itself has introduced online systems and communications networks, including social media channels, which have a factor in its expansion beyond London most recently. This evidence serves, once again, to underline the importance of digital communications to modern communities, even those whose members do not find it a primary form of communication.

Sheffield University British Asian Society grew largely on WhatsApp, which acted both as an informal organisational framework and as a platform on which to build individual and group relationships and explore the common interests and values that inform the group's evolving 'British Asian' identity. WhatsApp was also a conduit to the society's live events, but it also had the function, analogous with the social media use of the Welsh Warriors, of creating and deepening the group's social ties digitally, independently of any of their 'live' events.

Whether creating online friendships, as in the case of the Welsh Warriors and the British Asian Society, as an organisational tool, as in the case of all five of the communities, or as platforms for spreading positivity, inspiring others and growing awareness of the community, particularly evident in Wonderful Wild Women's use of Instagram or Lockdown Collective's sharing of their music and platforming of local businesses, new communities are subverting our understanding of how social media can be used.

Five key take-outs
for brands

01

Beware
brand-owner bias

If you're a marketer, seeing everything through your own brand-tinted glasses has never been so dangerous. There's a whole new world taking shape around us and it's leaving tried-and-tested research techniques for dead. So it's easy to miss what's really going on, lose touch and squander opportunities.

02 Throw the ladder down

With COVID-19 creating the acid test of a brand's kudos, adopting an engaged and selfless role – a relevant and recognisable Brand Purpose – is key. Positive stories of social impact are already happening, so brands must keep on doing the right thing every chance they get.

03

Be brilliant at bringing people together

Companies are communities. Maintain strong and respectful connections among your staff and you'll be a force to be reckoned with, while new research tells us that customers soon lose respect for companies that don't look after their people.[52]

04 Find

your voice

In volatile times, many brands struggle to maintain a clear, credible message. How people feel about your brand can transcend the actual product or service itself . Only when you understand the world and the cultures your brand operates in can you create harmonious connections with people.

05

Efficient is
not sufficient

Running a well-ordered business is important, but not at the cost of imagination and creativity. Make sure your processes allow your teams enough time to use their imaginations, to discover new, different, better. Every company should find the time to dream bigger.'

Conclusion

Whatever the headlines say about dislocation and disunity, our five groups are living proof that people are finding genuinely constructive common ground. Superficial notions of the social forces bringing us together or supposedly driving us apart are not sufficient to explain how people are interacting in 2020.

Certain longstanding tenets of community life, such as identity and geography, still play a role, one that's evolving along with other social values.

The collectives considered here don't fit simple definitions of community, and not every factor we've addressed uniformly applies to each community. The importance of 'identity' to the Lockdown Collective, for example, isn't as strong as it is for the members of Opening Doors or the British Asian Society. The role of wellness in the formation of the British Asian Society and Lockdown Collective is less direct than it is for Opening Doors, Welsh Warriors or Wonderful Wild Women. The social impact of the Welsh Warriors and the British Asian Society is harder to define than that of Lockdown Collective, Opening Doors or the Wonderful Wild Women. Opening Doors and British Asian Society's developments were influenced by geographical location less than the founding of Welsh Warriors, Lockdown or Wonderful Wild Women. And Opening Doors – at least until the beginning of COVID-19 – was less impacted by the advent of social media than the other four communities.

Yet the patterns of behaviour, values, and attitudes uniting these communities tell us a lot about the state of society and its hopeful direction.

Notions of identity are often depicted as catalysts for division, but these communities form identities that are a source of pride, agency and empowerment. They support and foster values of openness, acceptance, and inclusivity - values that have helped the communities flourish. And in this commitment, we can see a roadmap to a society that prizes diverse identities and uses them as a force towards unity, rather than division.

Similarly, these communities have all, at least indirectly, developed with the wellbeing of their members at their heart. They offer physical benefits and creative outlets (both acknowledged antidotes to stress and loneliness),and provide access to safe spaces, mutual support networks and positive role models.

As a society, our attitudes to mental health have developed rapidly in the past decade. We're more aware of its relationship to our physical health and leading a fulfilling life. In doing this, we've had to come to terms with the sheer scale of the mental health epidemic in modern living, and the risks it poses to us all. That's why there's a vital lesson in the attitudes of these groups towards wellbeing. They demonstrate how a concern for others can become part of mainstream culture within British society.

The same observations can be made about the emergence of 'social impact'. Again, not all the communities' actions match, nor do their impacts. Yet they've all developed a desire to help others around them, something that has intensified during the pandemic. We've seen positive results from direct action such as social care, support for other local organisations, wellness benefits and opportunities for others, opening up community identities beyond core membership, and people acting as sources of inspiration and pride for those around them.

Our observations give us hope. Too often, we witness hollow gestures, geared more towards creating a positive public image than offering any real benefits.

In these new communities, we see people's genuine desire to help those around them, to spread positivity, and materially better society beyond their own social unit.

As we look to build alternative structures post-COVID-19, each of the key dynamics at the heart of these communities offers us a roadmap. Together, they can leads us towards a society built upon groups that are more tolerant, more interesting, more diverse, better at communicating, and keener to look out for others as well as themselves.

We can learn a lot from them.

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